スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑭

ホーンテッド・ナイト?

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 14

Haunted Night

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
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The Creeping Darkness

It all started with a perfectly ordinary scene. "Noguwaaaaaaaaah!"

Crash!

With a scream and a flashy display of noise, someone came tumbling into the diner right at lunch hour. It was a familiar sight—at least around me—one that had already devolved into a mere snippet of daily life.

The customers buzzed for a split second, but no one dared to pry into the situation. That was only natural. Anyone with sense knew that in cases like this, it was wiser not to get involved.

However—

"Some... somebody! Please, lend your aid! The Princess is...!"

The man, still sprawled on the floor, managed to lift his head and speak. If he happened to be dressed as a proper knight, well, that changed the story.

Rescuing a princess with a knight in tow meant making a profit.

Finishing my precise calculations in an instant, I stood up from my chair with a clatter and walked over to the man.

"Hey! What happened!"

"...A... a mage... milady...?"

Raising a haggled face at my call, the man muttered. Well, wearing a black cloak in this heat with jewel talismans pinned here and there, my status as a mage was obvious at a glance.

"...The Princess is..."

"I get that she’s being attacked! So, where’s the scene!?"

"...Behind the shop... *gufu*..."

With just that, he let out a textbook groan and his head flopped back down to the floor.

Alright! Out back!

"Old man!"

"...Y-yes!"

I turned my eyes toward the shopkeeper watching from a distance and pointed a sharp finger at the fallen knight.

"Put my tab on his bill!"

With that, I dashed out of the shop. I felt like I heard some sort of protest rising from behind me, but of course, I ignored it—rather, I didn't have time to deal with trivialities.

I burst outside, scanned the area, and dove into a narrow alleyway a short distance from the shop!

"Eeeeeeeeee! Noooooo!"

I heard the terrified, raspy voice of a woman. Just as I thought!

Rounding the corner just ahead, a scene jumped into my view. A desolate, narrow alley. There, a girl sat huddled on the ground, directing a gaze of pure terror my way.

She looked a bit younger than me. She had silky, long silver hair, and the dress she wore was clearly made of silk.

Jackpot! Based on this, I figured there was no "actually poor" punchline coming! Now, to flatten all the thugs around here one by—

That was the plan, but...

The girl was the only one in the alley. There was no sign of anyone who looked like an attacker—

Wait!

"Above!?"

The girl's terrified gaze wasn't fixed on me, but above my head! Following her eyes, I saw a black shadow coiling in the empty air, backlit by the celestial light leaking through the gaps between the roofs!

A spider!?

For a moment, that was what I thought. But looking closer, it wasn't. Countless threads were woven between the buildings. Moving along them, suspended in mid-air, was the silhouette of a man with spindly limbs.

His abnormally thin body was wrapped in tight black clothing, and his face was covered by a strangely designed mask that revealed only his eyes.

"...Do not interfere needlessly... little girl..."

He spoke in a muffled, masculine voice.

"...If you promise to leave this place quietly and forget what you have seen here, I shall do you no harm..."

"Geez, that's a shame."

I scratched my cheek idly.

"Unfortunately, neither my eyes nor my memory are particularly bad, see..."

"...Ho... are you saying you do not fear me...?"

"Not really. I’m used to seeing people in weird outfits near me all the time."

Well, the sense of style required to hang from threads in a weird outfit without a care in the world was certainly "scary" in a certain way. I looked up at the assassin above me.

"Anyway. I'm sure you’re going to follow the cliché and say, 'Then I shall use force,' right? Fine. Bring it on. But—if you let your guard down because your opponent is a 'little girl' or because you have the high ground, you’re the one who’s going to end up hurting."

"...Heh... you talk big... I suppose it cannot be helped, since you do not know my ability... *kukukuku*..."

"...Your... ability?"

"That is right!"

The man’s eyes snapped wide.

"My ability is solely to appear suddenly above my opponent's head and freak them out!"

"Go home! **Fireball!**"

KABOOM!

With a single spell launched in a fit of irritation, the man was blown away beautifully and got snagged on a nearby balcony. Honestly... this wasn't a part-time job at a haunted house.

But that meant the knight who tumbled into the diner earlier... he must have seen this, freaked out, and run away alone in a panic... Talk about incredibly faint-hearted.

At any rate, evil had been vanquished. I flicked my cloak and turned toward the girl.

"Are you okay?"

Facing someone whose only talent was scaring people, I felt like there wasn't much to be "okay" about, but I suppose it was just a figure of speech.

"Eeeee! Don't come any closer!"

However, she still hadn't snapped out of her terror. Thinking I was going to harm her, she screamed and scurried backward while staring at me.

"...No... look... you don't have to worry, I'm not an enemy..."

"Nooooo! I'm goooing to be kiiiilled!"

"It's okay. The enemy is already..."

"Noooooooo!"

"..............."

"Heeeelp meeeeee—!"

"Shut up."

Thwack.

With a heel drop I delivered, she finally fell silent. I immediately grabbed her by the collar and dragged her up. To ensure my words wouldn't be interrupted by screams, I covered her mouth with my free hand.

"Don't make a scene. Just listen to what I have to say. I'm telling you I'm an ally. I came to save you. So—if you don't want to get hurt, don't ever scream like that again. Got it? Understood?"

My sincere persuasion finally seemed to get through. With teary, frightened eyes, she nodded vigorously.

Good. As long as you understand. I gave a small nod and released her mouth and collar.

"...U-um... so, who are you...?"

Still a bit frightened, she asked. I offered a friendly smile. The moment I smiled, I felt like she shuddered visibly, but that was probably just my imagination... probably.

"A knight came running into a diner earlier. He told me to save you. That’s why I came here."

"...Ah... Feldland..."

At the mention of the knight, the tension finally drained from her body.

"I see... then... thank you very much for saving me from such danger... Excuse me, but your name is..."

"Lina. Lina Inverse. As you can see, I’m a mage."

As I spoke and held out my right hand, she hesitantly extended hers while looking up at me.

"...Um... you won't crush my hand the moment we shake, will you...?"

"I won't, I won't."

...Seriously, what does she think I am? At any rate, reassured by my words, she exchanged a light handshake.

"I am... Laury Solonhorn. ...I don't quite understand... why I was being targeted..."

"...Hmm... Well, anyway, standing around talking here isn't great. Let's change locations and hear the details."

At my words, Laury gave a firm nod.

"Oh! Princess! Are you safe!? This Feldland guy was worried from the bottom of his heart!"

"Liar!"

Thunk!

Simultaneously with my shout, a nearby chair I threw struck the head of the knight—Feldland—who was at a table stuffing his face with food.

"Myaaaaa—*gefu*!"

I poked Laury in the stomach to silence her as she screamed in surprise next to me, then turned my eyes toward Feldland, who was rolling on the floor.

I hadn't looked closely earlier, but he looked to be around twenty. He was a man of average build with black hair. The armor he wore was grand, and he had a rather sharp, good-looking face... but...

"...W-what are you doing! Milady Mage!"

After making sure he swallowed what was in his mouth, he raised a voice of protest. I fixed him with a steady glare.

"It’s not 'what are you doing!' If you regained consciousness, you should have come to help immediately! Honestly...! Don't go eating a meal by yourself after asking

someone else for help!"

"W-what are you saying, Milady Mage! Eating when one can eat! That, too, is the mindset of a warrior!"

"Don't prioritize your stomach over your guard duty! ...I mean, just because something weird appeared above your head, you abandoned Laury-san, ran away, and fainted!? Is that normal!?"

"Do you not know the term 'strategic withdrawal'!? Besides, I did not faint! I was merely pretending to have fainted because I did not want to be involved!"

"That's even worse! And you say 'strategic,' but what meaning is there in leaving Laury-san behind!?"

"It has plenty of meaning as a decoy!"

"Don't treat the person you're guarding as a pawn!"

"N-now, now, Lina-san. Feldland didn't do it out of malice. Let's keep things civil."

Laury-san tried to soothe my shouting. Even if there was no malice, I didn't think there was any sincerity either, but well, if Laury-san herself said so, I had no choice.

"...Well... anyway... if you don't mind, could you tell me the details?"

"Yes. Well then..."

For the time being, the three of us sat at the table. Once the food was brought out, Laury-san began to explain the circumstances calmly.

According to the story, she was the daughter of a local lord who resided in a castle a short distance from here. Just the other day, an heir was born to a relative's family in Kyrgyz City, and a congratulatory visit had to be made. Unfortunately, her father was currently recovering from an illness. So, in the end, it was decided that she would go as a proxy, and they were currently on their way there.

However, for reasons unknown, this attack happened today.

"...Hmm..."

After hearing the whole story, I groaned and took a bite of a fried shrimp in front of

me. The shrimp was perfectly cooked, plump, and full of sweetness—delicious.

"...Do you really have no idea why you'd be targeted?"

"...No... none at all..."

She answered with a sigh and sorrowful eyes. However—even if she had no idea herself, as the daughter of a lord, there were plenty of reasons to be targeted.

A succession struggle involving power. A classic ministerial conspiracy. Or perhaps a kidnapping for profit. There was also the possibility that she had an idea but couldn't tell an outsider like me. Regardless, asking them more about it here would just be a waste of time.

"...Well... if you have no idea, it can't be helped. But in any case, what's certain is that you, Laury-san, will continue to be targeted from here on out."

At my words, the color instantly drained from Laury-san's face.

"Eeeeeeeeeh!? Noooooo! No way! I hate thaaaaaat!"

...And she was screaming again. This person...

"Don't worry! Princess!"

Thud!

"Ubu!?"

Feldland silenced Laury-san by bopping the back of her head with his removed helmet (likely made of steel).

"...Feldland... that hurts..."

Laury-san directed a resentful gaze at him, but Feldland puffed out his chest. "There is no need to be concerned! Considering that the Princess's voice would be a slight hindrance to the mutual consideration of future prospects, I merely eliminated that hindrance by the method I judged to be most swift!"

".....? I... see...?"

Failing to realize he was simply saying "I shut her up because she was noisy," Laury-san

seemed somewhat convinced. I immediately brought the conversation back.

"Well, I think it's only natural for Laury-san to feel anxious. But if you're that worried, I wouldn't mind coming along as a guard from here on. For a fee that isn't quite exorbitant."

"Milady Mage, that's what one calls 'extortion'—"

Shink!

I pointed a fork at the tip of Feldland's nose to silence him before he could say anything unnecessary, and continued my words.

"If you're going to be targeted in the future, there's a high chance that an opponent who uses magic will appear. At a time like that—I think having a mage like me around will make a big difference."

"...You're... right... certainly... Then Lina-san, may I ask for your help?"

"Of course."

I gave a firm nod—and thus, the path to a high income was secured. ...Probably.

"Eeeeeeeeeee!"

Laury-san's screams echoed... every day after that. It wasn't just because she was a sheltered young lady with no tolerance for harsh reality. The truth was, she just screamed at absolutely everything.

She screamed when she saw other people fighting. She screamed when juice spilled. She screamed when a fork tumbled. When a cockroach flew toward us from the inn wall, I admittedly screamed along with her.

At any rate, she was noisy beyond belief. Today was no different. As we were traveling along the highway, a band of bandits swarmed out in front of us, and as per usual, Laury-san let out a grand scream.

"What is it? Making such a loud noise..."

"Hyaaaaaaaa!"

"Our business is simple..."

"Noooooooo!"

"Leave your valuables..."

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Rest assured! Princess!"

Snap.

"...!"

After silencing Laury-san by twisting her neck just a tiny bit, Feldland turned back toward the bandits.

"Now. It is quiet now. Please continue."

"...Ah... well, thank you for the courtesy... then from the beginning..."

The man who seemed to be the bandit leader gave a polite bow and cleared his throat.

"...Um... What is it? Making such a loud noise. Are you afraid of us? Heh heh heh. Well, that’s fine. Our business is simple. If you quietly hand over your valuables, we won't take your lives..."

He spoke in a somewhat monotonous tone.

...Regardless, I couldn't help but feel that leaving Feldland by Laury-san's side was more dangerous than any bandit, but was that just my imagination...?

Feldland offered a smirk and a fearless smile.

"Heh... I see... But do you think I will quietly obey just because you say that!?"

With that, he took a bold step backward.

"Those insolent people who wish harm upon the Princess shall be punished by someone other than this Feldland, in my stead! Probably!"

"You fight too!"

"What are you saying, Milady Mage! Since you accepted the job of a guard, this is your work!"

"You were entrusted with guarding her too, weren't you!?"

"...Mm... you strike a rather painful point...!"

...Was it painful?

"...Well... fine... a group like this is certainly something I can handle alone..."

"W-what did you say!"

At my words, the bandits got riled up and reached for their swords—without time to draw them.

"**Windy Shield!**"

Fwoooosh!

"Nuwaaaaaah!?"

With no preamble and absolutely no dramatic build-up, they were easily blown away by the strong wind spell. However, it wasn't me who cast that last strike. Which meant this pattern was...

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! So this is where you were! Lina Inverse!"

A stupid laugh pierced through my eardrums and rent my brain. Emerging slowly from beyond the dust kicked up by the wind was—

"Eeeeeeeeee! What is that!?"

"Wahah!? S-strange!"

"...Ah... she's not an enemy, she's not an enemy."

I waved my hands frantically at Laury-san, who was cowering in fear, and Feldland, who was making a dash for it.

...Well... certainly... seeing someone in an outfit with needlessly high exposure, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace appearing suddenly would surprise most people.

But of course, it goes without saying. She was the one who cast the previous spell. My self-proclaimed rival, the elusive noise pollutant—Naga the White Serpent!

"...So? Naga. Why did you show up this time?"

"Heh. Your intuition is lacking, Lina. Since you were walking with such well-dressed people, I figured there was money to be made and decided to come for the leftovers!"

"...Wow! To boldly declare one is coming for 'leftovers'! You are quite a formidable person!"

Feldland was being impressed by something I didn't quite understand in the background. But putting that aside.

"Too bad. I've got things covered by myself here."

"Heh! You can try to hog all the good parts for yourself, but it won't go that way! Just think of this as being bitten by a stray dog and give up—quietly let me join you!"

"...Listen, Naga..."

"—I do not mind if we gain one more person."

The person who spoke was none of the four of us.

"Who!?"

The only answer to my demand was the sound of the wind blowing through the area.

Rustle...

The trees in the forest beside the highway made the sound of leaves rubbing together. The bandits blown away by Naga's spell earlier were still dizzy. No, in the first place, the voice I heard was an old, raspy one.

Swish swish swish!

The wind blew exceptionally hard, scattering the leaves around us.

"Kuh!"

"Noooooo!"

My vision was momentarily obstructed, and Laury-san's scream overlapped with my

groan. And then, once the wind settled, two silhouettes appeared out of thin air!

"...Look..."

"Eeeeeeeeeee! What are those!? Hyaaaaaa!"

"I've said it before, but shut up."

Gozu.

My strike, which interrupted their lines as usual, silenced Laury-san. Turning my back to Feldland, who was shaking her fallen form, I tossed aside a rock about the size of a baby's head that I'd just picked up, and faced the two shadows blocking the path.

They were a pair with strange appearances. One was a small old woman of indeterminate age. From between her disheveled white hair, two yellowed, abnormally wide eyes glared at us. From the edges of her dull-colored clothes, limbs wrapped in reddish-black stained bandages peeked out.

The other was a large man. "Large" didn't mean muscular; he was just big. His skin was strangely pale, and most bizarrely, his entire body was soaking wet as if he had just been submerged in water. From behind the black hair stuck to his forehead, two eyes with somewhat unfocused pupils peered out. He looked just like a fresh corpse pulled from the water.

Standing side-by-side, they looked like a paranormal phenomenon from any angle. One would definitely never want to run into them after dusk. It was only natural for Laury-san to scream this time. However, considering the situation, it was easy to tell they weren't ghosts.

"Are they acquaintances, Lina?"

"...Not exactly... but I have a rough idea."

Answering Naga's question, I fixed my eyes on the two.

"...Based on your looks... you're comrades of that spider-man from before, aren't you. Who are you people!?"

"...Kufufufufu... you have quite a bit of spirit... little girl... Could it be that you were the one who defeated 'Telmegid of the Poison Spider'...? I would like to praise you for such a feat, but only death awaits those who oppose our dark assassination guild,

'Twilight Phantom'... However, our business is only with the princess behind you. ...Though, I feel like she might be half-dead even without us lifting a finger... At any rate, if you do not wish to accept a fate of destruction, leave that girl and be gone this instant..."

At the bandaged hag's warning, I scratched my cheek.

"...No, being told that by comrades of a rare-beast spider-human who had no talent other than scaring people..."

"...Heh... he was the lowliest member of our organization... Following our guild's basic philosophy of 'start with the look,' he only got the look down and had no practical training at all..."

Don't send someone like that as an assassin... I feel like I've seen through these guys already... Regardless, it was getting tedious dealing with people like this. I waved my hands dismissively.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Anyway, let's fight quickly and get this over with."

"You said it! Little girl! Underestimating 'Langasha of the Death-Omen' and 'Nold of the Phantom Disturbance' will result in more than just a 'painful experience'! Do it! Nold!"

At Langasha's voice, Nold's mouth moved slightly. Instantly, nearly ten arrows of cold appeared before the lethargic giant and rained down toward us!

I see! The man had been moving his mouth slightly as if muttering for a while now—he was chanting spells in a voice too low for us to hear! You coward!

But! You aren't the only one who can use spells for a surprise attack!

"**Windy Shield!**"

Fwoosh!

I released the wind spell I had chanted while Langasha was talking, blowing away the incoming arrows of cold!

"What!?"

Langasha was shocked.

"Heh! Lina! I shall lend a hand here too!"

"I’m telling you now, I’m not paying you!"

"............!"

At my instantaneous words, Naga immediately crouched on the ground and started drawing circles in the dirt. Heh. Just as I thought, she was going to help in the chaos and use it as an excuse to demand a reward later. But I saw right through that too! Putting that aside, I began the incantation for my next spell.

"Here I come!"

Langasha dashed toward me. Fast! The incantation won't make it! But!

Scrape!

Reading the distance to Langasha, I kicked up the dry dirt at my feet!

"Wabu!?"

Taking the dust in her eyes, Langasha flinched and stopped. I immediately delivered a kick! However, as if predicting this, Langasha jumped backward just before my foot could reach her. My subsequent spell attack followed.

K-rash!

Flashing flames. Roaring explosions. But the old woman easily dodged that strike of mine too. Wow. Her movements are eerily fast! Grandma!

In that moment.

"............"

Nold's mouth moved slightly, and a sphere of pale blue light was born! **Fireball**!? Or was it **Freeze Arrow**!? The light sphere headed straight for—the slumped Laury-san and Feldland!

In that split second!

"Heh! Come to think of it, the reward should come from them, not Lina..."

On the axis connecting Nold and Laury-san's group, Naga—who had been drawing

circles in the dirt—seemed to have reached a conclusion of her own and suddenly stood up—

Clink!

The light sphere hit her right in the head, and she was instantly frozen solid on the spot! Ah. It was **Freeze Arrow**.

Nice follow, Naga! I'll remember this debt for at least three steps!

"Incredible! To protect the client with one's own body! As expected of a professional!"

Ignoring Langasha, who was giving a shout of admiration that missed the mark by 180 degrees, I dashed toward Laury-san and Feldland.

"Then—"

Langasha dashed toward me again. I braced myself. But Langasha's target wasn't us. She easily hoisted up the frozen Naga and dashed backward toward Nold. Wow. She’s strong.

Langasha fixed a steady glare on us.

"It seems I underestimated you! We shall withdraw for today! But we are taking this woman with us! If you value your comrade's life, come to the ruined church on the outskirts of Zebe Village, ahead on this road, at sunset tomorrow!"

"....."

Nold's unheard muttering overlapped with Langasha's words—

Whoosh!

With a gust of strong wind, leaves scattered, momentarily obscuring our vision. And then, once the wind settled—just like when they appeared, Langasha and Nold had vanished into thin air. Along with the frozen Naga...

"...Wha..."

After a silence fell, it was Feldland who spoke with an open mouth.

"What did she even come here for!? That Naga person!?"

"That's obvious. To stir up trouble—"

I answered without a hint of hesitation.

"...So... what are we going to do...?"

At Feldland's question, I averted my eyes from the still-slumped and silent Laury-san at my feet (honestly, the rock might have been a bad idea.) Then i looked far into the distance of the stretching highway, stating clearly:

"That’s obvious too. We’re going to abandon her and hurry on ahead—"

(The Creeping Darkness: To be continued)

Will Lina and her party make it to Kyrgyz City safely?! Or rather, will Laury even be alive by then?! Just between us, the author is feeling quite tempted by a development where they abandon Naga, arrive at their destination at the start of the next chapter, and wrap things up in about half a page!

Don't you dare, Author! Your editor will cry! Well, for now, let's worry about the consequences later! At any rate, next up: "The Creeping Darkness" Part 2! You don't even have to wait. (Oh, a new pattern!)

The Creeping Darkness (Part 2)

Synopsis
Lina Inverse has ended up guarding the incredibly cowardly Laury and her irresponsible knight-attendant, Feldland, on their way to Kyrgyz City. However, standing in their way are Langasha and Nold, assassins from the guild "Twilight Phantom"! Thanks in part to the "non-cooperation" of the suddenly appearing Naga, Lina managed to repel the assassins. But Langasha took Naga hostage and threw down a challenge! Lina and the others then firmly resolved to ignore Naga and move on!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I've found you, Lina Inverse!"

"EEEEEEEEEeeeee!?"

"Uwa, it’s out!"

"Udowaah!"

At the sound of that familiar high-pitched laugh and the sudden appearance of that figure, the three of us—Laury-san, Feldland, and I—screamed and made a break for it.

"...Wait...! Just a, Li—"

"Noooooooo! Please, Naga, just pass on to the afterlife without looking back!"

"Help, heeeelp meeeee!"

"C-curse it! Is a knight’s sword truly useless against evil spirits and wraiths!? In that case, while the mage and the Princess are being haunted to death, I shall return home to report the turn of events!"

"I'm still alive! I'm right here!"

To us, panicking and fleeing in terror, Naga’s ghost... wait.

"...Alive?"

I skidded to a halt and looked back tentatively. Come to think of it—her appearance was the same as before, and we were on a highway in broad daylight. This was hardly

the setting for a ghost to appear.

It had been a few days since we abandoned Naga and hit the road. We were about three or four days away from our destination, Kyrgyz City.

"Lies! You're just saying that to make us drop our guard so you can haunt us to death!"

I grabbed the collar of the still-screaming Laury. Feldland stared intently at Naga's form.

"Hmm... now that you mention it, she doesn't look like a zombie or a wraith."

"...Well... knowing Naga, it might just be that she doesn't *realize* she's dead... but if that's not it, how did you get away? You?"

"How, indeed..."

The voice that answered wasn't Naga's, but that familiar raspy croak.

Whoosh!

The wind and leaves rustled, and appearing next to Naga were the members of "Twilight Phantom," Nold and Langasha! Nold, as usual, was soaking wet from head to toe. ...It would be really gross if that was all sweat. Well, regardless.

"What is the meaning of this!" I shouted at Langasha. "The deal was that you could take Naga's life as long as you stopped following us!"

"I made no such deal!"

"...Wait...? Was that it...? Well, whatever... so, why is Naga with you?"

"Heh! It's obvious, isn't it, Lina! Since you all abandoned me so easily, I decided to join their side!"

"How could you! To betray us! Do you have no conscience!?"

"Don't call me a traitor when you abandoned me first, Lina!"

"...Hmph... it seems persuasion is impossible..."

"You weren't even trying to persuade me!"

Well, true. As my conversation with Naga died down, Langasha stepped forward smoothly.

"At any rate, Lady Naga, as we arranged, we shall leave the little mage girl to you."

"Heh. Fine by me."

In response, Naga crossed her arms, puffed out her chest, and faced me!

"In the meantime, we shall deal with those two..."

The old woman glared at Laury-san and Feldland with bloodshot eyes. I see. So that’s their play.

"Eeeee! Fel... Feldland! Those people, they’re coming for us!"

"Rest assured, Princess! I shall return to the castle once to call for reinforcements, so please hold out here in the meantime! I expect it will take about ten days!"

"...Kukukuku... I won't let you."

Before I could throw a comeback at Feldland's line, Langasha spoke.

"I see right through your scheme to make us drop our guard with such talk and then catch us by surprise! I'll finish you off first! Nold!"

"No, I was actually... uwa-wa-wa-wa!"

Clang-clink-clink!

Feldland somehow dodged the ice arrows Nold fired at Langasha's command. Langasha then charged in!

"Hah!"

"Owa-wa-wa!"

Ducking under the old woman's hand-sword strike delivered with a sharp breath, he retreated.

"You dodged that well! But how about this...!"

Mid-sentence, Langasha leaped sideways. A split second later, a sphere of light impacted the spot she had occupied!

KABOOM!

Amidst the blast of the exploding fireball, Langasha slowly turned around. Toward me—the one who fired that shot.

"Ngh... Lady Naga! I thought I asked you to handle this one! What on earth are you do...ing..."

The old woman’s voice, thick with anger, trailed off and vanished. She had just seen

Naga collapsed on the ground, twitching.

"For now, it looks like she was easily defeated by me."

At my words, the old woman was momentarily speechless. Right after Langasha and the others turned their attention to Laury-san's group, I tossed a single gold coin behind Naga. While she was distracted, I beaned her in the head with a rock I'd picked up. That was all there was to it.

"...Useless..."

"Heh. You miscalculated. The moment you judged Naga to be 'useful,' your defeat was decided!"

"...Grrr!"

I pointed sharply at Langasha, and the old woman showed signs of agitation.

"So, I'm your opponent now!"

"Agh! It can't be helped! Nold! We'll finish off this little girl first!"

"....."

The wet giant turned toward me with a dull gaze, muttering under his breath again. As if I'd let you! I began chanting a spell and dashed toward Nold! I knew Langasha excelled at martial arts despite her looks. In that case, I'd take out Nold first!

"I won't let you!"

Langasha moved to intercept me, blocking my path. But—too slow! As I ran past, I drew the short sword at my waist and swung!

"Nuo!?"

Startled by the sharpness of the flashing blade, Langasha hurriedly leaped back. To be honest, I'm quite proud of my sword skills too. Against someone like Langasha, it was more than enough as a feint. I leaped in the opposite direction from the retreating Langasha, turned around, and—*heh*.

With a small smirk, I headed toward Nold again.

"You! Do you mock me, girl!? Nold! What are you doing!"

In response to the enraged Langasha, Nold muttered...

"....."

Arrows of cold appeared and rained down on me! You guys are too predictable! I dodged with another sideward leap and dove straight into the forest brush behind Nold!

"You won't es—!"

Before Langasha could finish.

"**Windy Shield!**"

F-WHOOOOOOOM!

Following the "Words of Power," the wind erupted all at once, drowning out the screams of the people and leveling everything in the vicinity. After the gale, which was practically an explosion, passed, only one person remained standing.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Have you learned your lesson now!? The power of Naga the White Serpent!"

Yes. It was Naga, who had made a remarkably fast recovery from the damage of being beaned by me.

"...I think they've learned their lesson. In many ways."

"Lina!? You were safe!?"

As I crawled out of the brush, Naga raised a voice of shock. Naturally. That provocative smirk from earlier wasn't for Langasha. It was for Naga, who I saw was about to wake up. Of course, I acted knowing that an enraged Naga would fire off a reckless, wide-range attack spell. I simply took cover in the thicket.

Hmph. This is what happens when you make Naga an ally without knowing her well.

"Fine! Then I shall simply defeat you again!"

As Naga took a stance, I scratched my head.

"...'Simply defeat' is all well and good... but are you actually getting a commission fee from that Langasha person?"

"...Eh...? Commission fee...?"

At the mention of "commission fee," the momentum vanished from Naga's voice.

"If you aren't getting paid, then even if you defeat me, it's just unpaid labor. And if you get beaten back, it's adding insult to injury, right?"

"...Ugh... hmm... unpaid labor..."

Oh, she's thinking. She's really thinking. Of course, Naga had picked a fight with me not for a job, but to vent her grudge for being abandoned. But having been knocked out once, the word "commission fee" blinded her, and she completely lost sight of her original motive.

She thought for a moment and then said, "Heh! Now that you mention it, you're right! So, from now on, I'll join your side and take a commission fee!"

At those words—

"...Y-you... so that was your plan...!"

The raspy voice filled with resentment came from the side; it was Langasha. Having somehow recovered from the damage, Langasha and Nold staggered to their feet. The old woman glared at Naga.

"...To make us think you were abandoned so you could join us and strike from behind when the time was right...! Come to think of it, you were defeated far too easily earlier! You were pretending to be knocked out, waiting for our attention to drift!"

Wow. Talk about an over-calculated interpretation.

"Heh! It's too late to realize it now! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga jumped on the misunderstanding, puffing out her chest with pride.

"Agh! Then we'll just have to defeat you both! Do it, Nold!"

"....."

At Langasha's command, the still-dripping giant began muttering a spell. ...Wait a sec... could this guy be...

"Here I come!"

Langasha charged with a roar. Her target—Naga!

"Heh! You underestimate me! For someone like you to defeat Naga the White—"

Thud. ...*Plop*.

While talking big, she took a direct thrust from Langasha, was blown away, and collapsed.

"....."

At the sheer patheticness of it, Langasha was momentarily speechless.

"...Hoh... to atone for tricking us, you took that blow head-on. An admirable spirit for an enemy."

Langasha, once again, completely misinterpreted Naga, who had simply failed to dodge because she was too full of herself.

"But you're naive! Did you think I wouldn't see through your plan to catch us off-guard by pretending to fall!? Nold! Finish this one off first!"

The giant slowly shifted his gaze toward Naga—

"**Fireball!**"

But I was the one who cast the spell! Countless tiny fireballs enveloped Nold! It was a spell with almost no lethal power, used mostly for distraction. However—

Fwoomp.

A split second later, Nold’s entire body was engulfed in crimson flames.

"No! Nold!"

Langasha's cry of regret came too late. The giant, still silent, thrashed about for a moment before collapsing on the spot.

"...Ah. I thought so," I said. "I wondered why you never dried off despite being soaking wet... it wasn't water, it was some kind of oil."

"...Y-you...! To turn our basic philosophy of 'starting with the look' against us...! You’re good, girl!"

...Actually, rather than me being "good," your basic philosophy is just kind of wrong...

Langasha leaped and hoisted up Nold’s massive, still-smoldering body with ease.

"Remember this! Next time, I shall surely have your heads!"

With that parting threat, she sprinted toward the forest.

Too slow! I’ve no obligation to let someone go after they say "I'll kill you next time!" I hurriedly chanted a spell—

"**Fireball!**"

"**Freeze Arrow!**"

...Eh...?

The voice that overlapped with mine was... Naga!

The spheres of light fired by the two of us collided just before reaching Langasha—

Ping.

Leaving only a sharp, clear sound, they shattered into the air in vain. Spell interference. Because **Fireball** and **Freeze Arrow** negate each other, it ended with just a noise. No wind was even generated. While I stood there stunned, Langasha, carrying Nold, vanished into the thicket.

.....Uhhh...

After a moment of being frozen, I whirled around toward the revived Naga.

"Listen, Naga! You let her get away because you interfered!"

"Heh! What are you talking about, Lina Inverse!? That's my line!"

Sparks flew as our gazes met—

"...Um..."

The tense atmosphere was softened by a hesitant female voice. Turning our eyes that way, we saw Laury-san, who had apparently recovered from the earlier shock, sitting on the ground and looking at Naga with a somewhat frightened gaze. Incidentally, Feldland was still knocked out next to her.

"...What... exactly happened...?"

"Ah. Well..."

"Heh! You should be grateful!" Naga's boastful voice rang out, cutting me off. "I, Naga the White Serpent, pretended to defect to the enemy and repelled them at the critical moment! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"...Eh! Was that it! I honestly thought you had really betrayed us..."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Of course! To deceive your enemy, first deceive your allies! To deceive your allies, first deceive yourself! If you convince yourself you've betrayed them, no one can see through it!"

"...Wow. That's incredible..."

Laury-san was impressed, her eyes wide. ...Actually, if you interpret Naga's words

correctly, she just said, "I really did betray you"... well, whatever. It’s the usual.

"I see! In other words, there are no more enemies!"

The one who sat up with that shout was, of course, Feldland, who had been lying there until just now.

"You! You were awake and pretending to be unconscious, weren't you!"

"What are you saying, Milady Mage! From a strategic standpoint, I merely adopted the tactic I deemed best to minimize the probability of an attack on me from an adversary!"

"...Which means, 'The enemy is targeting Laury-san, so if I play dead, I'll be safe,' right...?"

"Ah! Milady Mage! It troubles me when you put it in such easy-to-understand terms!"

"Go be troubled on your own! Honestly... well, fine. At any rate, we managed to scrape through for now... but they’ll probably come at us with everything they’ve got next time."

"...W-with everything...?"

Though she didn't scream like usual, Laury-san spoke in a frightened voice. I gave a small nod.

"In that case... could we ask Naga-san here for help as well...? Oh, of course, we’ll pay a proper commission fee..."

"Heh. I don't mind. I'm already in this deep."

Naga puffed out her chest at Laury-san's proposal. ...Well, making Naga an ally can often lead to death, but this time, I didn't feel like objecting. Feldland was useless, and Naga is like a pair of shears—dangerous but useful if handled right. If I controlled her well, I could use her as an invincible shield. (How cruel.) More importantly, the fact that my commission fee wouldn't decrease was a big factor.

A few As he bent forward, a large amount of liquid erupted from his helmet! It collided with the sphere of light ahead—

KABOOM!

Simultaneously with the fireball’s explosion, a wave of fire erupted! A technique where he puts an oil bladder and a mechanism to spray it inside his helmet and armor, then makes it collide with and explode against a pre-fired fireball to turn it into a

wave of fire!

However!

"**Burst Flare!**"

Fwoooosh!

Against the anti-fire spell I cast, the surging wave of fire was blocked by an invisible wall just before reaching us, flowing away to the left and right.

"What! My technique was blocked!?"

"Of course it was!" I shot back at the shocked Ruogle.

"The moment you named yourself 'Fire-Salamander,' it was like declaring 'I'm going to use fire attacks!' Of course your hand would be revealed! All I had to do was have an anti-fire spell ready and waiting!"

"...N-ngh...! To think my policy of 'starting with the look' would backfire in such a way...!"

You'd know that if you thought about it for a second. Normally. ...Well, admittedly, there are many people in this world who do things without thinking about obvious consequences and then end up regretting it...

"Agh... in that case...! ...A normal **Fireball**!"

"**Burst Flare.**"

"Then **Fire Arrow**!"

"**Burst Flare.**"

"How about this, **Explosion Array**!"

"And once again, **Burst Flare**. ...Seriously, what are you doing powering down more and more... Don't tell me you can't use anything besides fire-system spells..."

"Heh! If one starts with the look, then naturally that’s how it goes!"

"Don't be proud of it! And? Next?"

"...Ugh... hmm... next..."

"...If you’re out of moves, I'll go with a **Fireball**."

BOOM!

With the strike I fired, Ruogle’s entire body was engulfed in flames.

"Foolish! Did you think fire would work on him!"

The one who threw those mocking words at me wasn't Ruogle, but Langasha.

"His armor is entirely fireproof! Such flames won't work!"

"...Hmph... Then what about the parts not covered by armor and his oil bladder?"

"...!?"

Having finally realized the fatal flaw, the old woman was at a loss for words. Meanwhile, Ruogle collapsed limply. ...Wow, he's weak.

"...Y-you...! Then even if I am alone!"

Screaming in a fit of desperation, Langasha kicked off the ground! Her target was me!

—I won't finish my next incantation in time!

I could fight with my sword, but if I got into a close-quarters struggle, there was a risk that Naga, standing to the side, would fire off a spell once our movements stopped.

In that case—there was only one move! I leaped diagonally backward and, without a word, kicked Feldland in the back!

"Uwa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa!?"

Screaming, Feldland charged toward Langasha! The invincible "Human Shield"! It’s a truly rational method: buy time by throwing an ally at the enemy, and chant your spell in the meantime!

"Out of the way, brat!"

Langasha raised her cleaver high—

Gidon!

A strange sound rang out just as my hand reached for "Human Shield Mark II," aka Laury-san. Looking toward the sound—*thud*. The broken blade of the cleaver hit the ground with a heavy noise. And Langasha collapsed.

...Eh...?

"What are you doing, Milady Mage!"

"...Eh... no, well... I thought I'd let you be useful for once..."

Feldland walked toward me and raised a protest. I explained without fully understanding the situation myself. "M-more importantly, what just happened?"

"I simply sliced off the cleaver's blade and struck the elder with the hilt of my sword."

"...Huh...?"

He said it so matter-of-factly that my eyes went wide. ...Wait... "simply"... could it be...

"Could it be that you were actually strong this whole time!?"

"Nah, Milady Mage. It's nothing that special."

"...Well, he is the best swordsman in our domain," Laury-san explained.

...I... I see... *wait*!

"Wait a minute! Then why have you been running away every single time until now!"

"...Well, he is the biggest problem child in our knight order."

"Nah, Princess. It's nothing that special."

...Oh, brother...

But regardless, with this—

In that instant!

"**Earth Rage!**"

Crackle-crackle-crackle!

Along with the "Words of Power," lightning that pierced heaven and earth struck us all down.

—Ngh...!

It was a wide-range, low-voltage lightning spell. It had almost no lethal power and would only leave the body paralyzed for a while, but it was almost impossible to dodge.

"As I thought—you let your guard down thinking you had defeated everyone."

Following the man's voice drifting on the wind, I managed to shift only my gaze. Standing there quietly was a man in a black cloak and a black robe, wearing a mask modeled after a skull.

"...W-who... are... you...?"

Feldland, who seemed barely able to speak, asked in a slurred voice. The masked man gave a bow.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am the leader of 'Twilight Phantom,' Demon-man Bazel."

He turned slowly and faced Laury-san.

"...I have no personal grudge against you, but this is my job. Do not blame me, but your own misfortune for being born a noble. Princess Catherine?"

.....

"...*Who... is that...?*"

Everyone's raspy voices harmonized at once.

—A long silence—

".....Eh?"

After a long pause, Bazel asked back in a dazed voice.

"...Princess... Catherine..."

"...I'm... Laury Solonhorn..." Laury-san said while still lying on the ground.

"Come to think of it... I do have a cousin named Catherine who looks a lot like me..."

"...Eh...?"

...Wait a minute, you... I glared at the man.

"...Could it be... you guys... have been targeting us this whole time... because of a case of mistaken identity!?"

"...M-mm... I'm starting to get that feeling myself... B-but a few mistakes are unavoidable. After all, this is our first job..."

.....Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho.....

"...You guys... aren't cut out for... this business..."

"...Mm... well, now that you say that... anyway, sorry for the trouble. Well, then."

"Wait right there, you."

My voice struck Bazel's back as he turned to leave. It was laced with a quiet killing

intent.

"...W-what is it...?"

As Bazel turned back fearfully, Naga and I both rose steadily to our feet. Time—and more importantly, anger—had completely washed away the numbness from my body.

"Heh-heh-heh... surely you don't think you can insult Naga the White Serpent to this extent and just walk away quietly... that would be naive..."

"N-n-n-n. Same here."

As Naga and I stepped forward, Bazel retreated step by step.

"...N-now, wait... since we know it was a misunderstanding, we have no reason to fight... stop looking at me with those scary eyes. It would be wise to avoid any more pointless conflict..."

"AS IF!"

KABOOM!

With a scream, the screw-kick I launched struck Bazel right in the face.

—And so—

"...What should we do? Princess? Should we join in too?"

"...I think I'll just stay lying down a bit longer... me..."

Beside the still-lying Laury-san and Feldland, the "Beat-Up-Bazel-to-a-Pulp Festival" by Naga and me continued until nightfall.

(The Creeping Darkness: End)

A Distant Day's Conclusion (Part 1)

"Oh yeaaaah! A hundred gold coins, gotten!!"

In the midst of the scorched bandits falling all around me, I let out a victory howl toward the night sky. The large jar I held up with both hands shimmered in the moonlight.

——I want you to take back a family heirloom jar stolen by bandits. It's a fine piece, you see——

The request from Mr. MacBain, a wealthy old guy living in a nearby town, was exactly what I had been hoping for. After all! If I beat down the bandits and "confiscate"—I mean, intercept—their treasure, and return the requested item on top of that, I get a bonus of a hundred gold coins!

For me, Lina Inverse—who loves bullying bandits almost as much as three meals a day and a juicy deal—how could I call this anything but a golden opportunity!?

I had been scouring the area for bandit gangs, and even if they had nothing to do with the request, I'd give them a good thrashing just for the heck of it if I found them. And today, finally. I found a group of bandits deep in the mountains, huddling around a campfire to divide their loot—and among that loot, I spotted the requested item.

The rest was simple. Since an explosion-type spell would be bad if it broke the jar, I rained down a shower of Fire Arrows on the crowd of bandits. Once everyone stopped moving, I checked the treasure. On the bottom of the jar, just as the client described, were the engravings of a fox and an owl.

Hmph! Piece of cake!

Still holding the jar up to the sky, I basked in the afterglow of victory—

——Swish!

Craaaash.

The two sounds happened almost simultaneously—or so it felt. The sound of the wind whistling. And... the sound of the jar in my hand shattering.

"...Eh...?"

As I stood there dazed, the client's jar—literally a hundred gold coins—turned into mere shards and fell before my eyes.

"...Uh... umm..."

"——Kukukuku... I've finally found you, Lina Inverse!"

From diagonally in front of me, while I remained frozen with my hands still shaped like they were holding the jar, that voice rang out. A man's voice, still young—

Creeeeak, I turned my face toward the sound. There, with the dark forest at his back, stood a single silent silhouette. His face was too dark to see clearly, but his right hand was repeatedly tossing and catching something small.

...I see... ...So he threw a stone and smashed my jar... I see, I see...

"——Do you remember? Me?"

The man walked slowly toward me—

"Who cares about that! **Fireball**!"

DOOOOOM!

My strike bloomed into an orange flower in the darkness, blowing the man away fair and square.

"——Customer, you seem to be in a quite foul mood today."

"Ngh?"

At the words of the shop girl who brought the food to my table, I shot back a glinting, displeased glare.

"...Ugh...! N-no... it’s nothing. Please enjoy your meal..."

Sensing something dangerous in that look, the shop girl set down the dishes and scurried away. ...Hmph. Maybe I felt a tiny bit bad.

This was a small diner in the town where the client lived. The storefront wasn't much to look at, but the prices were cheap and the food was good, so it was a place I frequented while staying in town for the jar search. As such, she was a waitress I was familiar with... but in this situation, asking me to be in a good mood is asking for the impossible.

The day after the jar was broken. When I spoke honestly to the client, the answer was exactly as expected. Namely—"If you couldn't recover it safely, there's no fee."

...Well... I can certainly understand the sentiment... but in cases like this, I feel like saying, "The jar broke, but you did a good job. Here's five hundred gold coins for your hard work," is what's necessary to build—not a sucker—but a harmonious human relationship...

I wonder what kind of human being thinks they can't pay more than the five gold coin deposit. Well, to be fair, it's not like I had *zero* income from this incident besides the deposit. When I flattened the bandits, I thoroughly confiscated their treasure, so in that sense, I'm definitely in the black.

HOOOOOWEVER! Setting that aside, the one who really ticks me off is that guy from yesterday!

It’s true that I left myself open in the joy of getting the jar. But! Why go through with such a nasty prank!? Grrr! Just thinking about it makes me mad all over again! When I'm mad, I eat to forget! Thus, I reached my spoon toward the flounder cream stew that had just arrived—

"I’ve found you! Lina Inverse!"

The moment the door opened, a man's voice rang out.

"...Hm...?"

After taking the first hot, huffing-puffing bite, I turned my eyes toward him. Standing there was a slightly slender man in his early twenties, dressed in warrior-style clothing, with black hair and a face that looked like his personality was definitely

warped.

Incidentally, it was a face I didn't recognize.

"Do you remember!? Me!?"

——*I don't*——

The words I was about to say froze in my throat. That phrasing and that voice—

"——No way——! From yesterday——!?"

"Exactly! And furthermore, I'll say—*wham!?*"

Gfph!

As the man reeled and stumbled from a direct hit to the side of his face from a wooden chair I threw, I unleashed a tirade.

"How dare you do that to me yesterday! Thanks to you, I didn't get any money from the client! How on earth are you going to take responsibility for this!? More importantly, what were you thinking, pulling a stunt like that!?"

"That’s what I was about to tell you!"

The man managed to regain his posture, rubbing his cheek where the chair had hit.

"My face... do you really not remember it? It’s not a story from yesterday or today. It's a story from about ten years ago..."

...Ten years... hey, you... even if you tell me a story from that long ago... I was obviously still a kid back then. I was busy playing with the neighborhood kids in my hometown of Zephilia...

"You don't know!? Then let me ask! Does the name... Walter Highland mean nothing to you!?"

"...Still don't know..."

At my flat response, the man's face instantly flushed with rage.

"...Y-you... You bastard!"

He stomped over to my table.

"Those days of our youth... the many things you did to me... I won't let you say you've forgotten!"

"No, something from that long ago... ——Wait a minute!"

At this "Walter" guy's words, I stood up in spite of myself.

"So what? Because I did something to you when we were kids, you smashed the jar I found yesterday for revenge!?"

"Hmph. Precisely——"

WHACK!

Before he could even finish. My swung chair made a direct hit on Walter's head!

"...Wha...! What are you doing!? Suddenly attacking like this, you woman...!?"

"That's my line! Bringing up something from that long ago now, how dare you ruin my hundred gold coins!"

"...Wha... What are you saying! No matter how many years pass, there's no way one can forget the treatment they received from others!"

"...I mean... having someone say something so gloomy with such pride..."

"What do you mean gloomy!? Humans are normally like that!"

"Wrong, wrong," I immediately interjected. I mean, sure, humans do have that tendency to some extent, but holding a grudge over something from ten years ago... and from childhood at that... feels like a failure as a human being no matter how you look at it...

"If you say I'm wrong, what about you!? Do you mean to say you can forget the malice you've received!?"

"...I mean... I'm not the type to hold a grudge that much... If I say I remember from when I was little... at most... If it's something with a clear date, on my third birthday party, Phinney-chan from next door took the strawberry off my cake, or going outside that evening and getting barked at by the Callahan's untrained dog, or the next day the neighborhood brat taking the candy I had, and that night, my mom scolding me

pretty badly for some reason... ...Ah. Now that I remember it, I’m starting to get pissed off..."

"You hold a grudge incredibly clearly... Then let me ask, do you remember the name of that neighborhood kid who took your candy?"

"Umm, if I recall..."

As I was about to say it, I finally remembered.

"——Walter Highland!"

"Exactly! This is—*urg!?*"

"It was you! It was you all along! How dare you take my candy! Give it back right now, return it this instant!"

Without letting him finish, I grabbed Walter by the collar and started shaking and choking him. Come to think of it, his face did have a trace of someone I’d seen somewhere long ago.

"...W-wait!"

Walter forced my hands off him.

"You! The fact that you'd say that means you really don't remember things like hitting me from behind with a flowerpot after I took the candy, do you!?"

"...Eh...?"

A flowerpot... was it...? I thought for a moment—

"——Oh!"

I clapped my hands once.

"Now that you mention it, when I got scolded by my mom that night, I feel like she was saying something about a flowerpot... I see! That’s why I was being scolded! Alright! Now the mystery is solved! So, you can go home now!"

"I’m not going home! I didn't come here to resolve your inner turmoil! ...Judging by this, you probably don't remember, but... after that, you did many things to me! Pitfalls and flying kicks from behind were the mild ones... when I was eight or nine...

after you learned magic, you hit me with a Fire Arrow saying 'It's Walter, so it's fine!', I seriously thought I was going to die!"

At Walter's words, I turned a distant gaze toward the soot-stained ceiling of the diner.

"...I guess I was a bit of a tomboy back then."

"Does 'a bit of a tomboy' cover it!? ...For a child, losing to someone younger, and a girl at that, how much of a psychological scar that becomes... you wouldn't understand!?"

"Yeah. Not at all."

"..... ...Well... anyway... Because of all that, I swore a firm oath in my heart: 'One day, I will definitely defeat her!' ——However! My father, who was a civil official at the castle, was suddenly transferred, and the whole family moved away, and that was the last of you! Thanks to that, my pride has been wounded ever since! ——But I am not a man who just cries! To one day defeat you and regain my lost pride, I have been accumulating power every day!"

"...In other words... you're a person who spares no effort to bully a younger girl..."

"Don't put it that way! That'll lead to weird misunderstandings! This is a reprisal and a ritual! Lina Inverse! For me to reclaim my true self!"

"...A 'true self' that only comes back by getting back at a kid who bullied you in the past... sounds like an incredibly low level..."

"Shut up! Don't say that! After all, I'm thinking that a bit myself as I say it!"

"...Then you should probably stop..."

"I can't do that! Because to achieve this, I've even built my own criminal organization!"

...*Twitch*...

"...Cri... minal... organization...?"

"Exactly!"

——Criminal organization—— The moment I heard it, whether he noticed it or not, a tiny smile appeared on my lips and vanished as he stood tall and spoke.

"My information network caught rumors of you! So I, myself, have come out like this!"

"...I see... And so, to provoke me, you smashed my jar..."

"You finally seem to understand!" Walter said in an inexplicably triumphant tone.

Hff-hff-hff... I understand. I understand very well. That a "sucker" has come to me on a silver platter. To be honest, I was planning to just listen to his story, then blow him away with a single attack spell and call it a day.

HOOOOWEVER! If this Walter has built a criminal organization, that’s a different story! If the opponent is a villain, even if I thrash them soundly and then confiscate their money and goods, everything is okay!

Then it's best to accept this challenge! I pointed at Walter squarely and—*zip!*

"Alright! If you’re going that far, I’ll take you on with everything I've got! Tell me! The location of your headquarters! I'll storm in there myself and crush it for good!"

"Very well! Then come! About two days' travel along the Crimson Forest road extending east from this town, in the village of Balis, my criminal organization, 'Midnight Requiem,' is located! If you don't come, I'll consider you to have been struck by cowardice! I'll be waiting! Hahahaha!"

Laughing loudly and sonorous, Walter turned on his heel and left the shop.

Alright. Better go wash your neck and wait. I'll go and without a word...

"...Um..."

From beside the internally burning me, the shop girl spoke up hesitantly.

"...With that exchange between you customers just now, all the other customers have left... what should we do...?"

"...Oh...?"

When I looked, sure enough, at some point, perhaps sensing the smell of trouble, all the customers besides me had vanished from the shop. ...Umm. Maybe hitting him with the chair was a bad idea... ...But even if you say 'what to do'...

"...F-for now... one more order of Petit Apple Juice."

At my words, the shop girl, silently shedding tears, retreated into the back of the shop.

It was a small, small village nestled in the mountains.

——Balis Village—— It looked like a peaceful village you could find anywhere. But somewhere near here, Walter's organization headquarters was supposed to be.

First, identifying the location. For the sake of gathering information, I headed to a small tavern at the edge of the village.

"——Does the name 'Midnight Requiem' sound familiar?"

"——Ah. If it's that——"

At my question, which I posed after ordering a juice and taking my time, the old man in the customer-less shop blinked his eyes sleepily.

"Go straight down the main street and turn right at the second corner. After a while, you'll see a white building on your left. That’s it."

.....

"...Pardon?"

"So, out of the shop and right. Second corner right, straight ahead, the white building on the left. Did you get that?"

"...No... um... I got the directions... ...but... it's the location... of 'Midnight Requiem'... right...?"

"That's right."

...It's... 'that's right'... hey... It’s right in the middle of the village!? The criminal organization headquarters!? Could it be that everyone in this village is involved with the organization in some way...!?

Anyway, there’s nothing for it but to actually go there. I gulped down my juice, paid the bill, left the shop, and followed the path as told.

And then——

"...It's really there..."

In front of the white building, I muttered in a daze. A white fence on a reasonably large plot of land. Inside stood a relatively large, white-painted building that looked like some kind of facility. A black plate was embedded in the main gate, and the name "Midnight Requiem" was indeed engraved there in gold letters.

In that case——it really is here after all—— Either way, I just have to go in! I passed through the gate and threw open the building's front door without a word!

"...You've come... Lina Inverse..."

The moment I stepped into the entrance hall, the voice I heard was unmistakably Walter Highland's.

——It really is here!? In the empty white entrance hall, the *thump, thump* of approaching footsteps echoed—

"I was waiting for you."

Appearing at the top of the stairs at the end of the hall—behind the second-floor railing—was Walter, dressed in black leather armor! Beside him was a small man wrapped in a black cloak, seemingly a mage.

I glared up at Walter and—*glare!*

"I've come as promised! Now, let's settle this!"

"——Don't shout so much. To be honest, I have no intention of settling it here right now. There's a small clearing south of the village. Let's settle it there."

Hmph! What are you saying now! First of all, I have a meticulous plan to flatten you without a word and take all the treasure here! I have no intention of going along with a "clearing at the edge of the village" or whatever!

"Shut up! I want to settle it here! So, **Vibration Bullet**!"

"Whoa! Wai...!"

KA-THOOM!

The spell I fired without a word missed the dodging Walter and hit the hallway ceiling behind him, making a flashy noise.

"W-wait, Lina Inverse! Listen to what I have to say!"

Walter said something nonsensical as he headed toward me down the stairs with the mage. He's probably planning to jump into my personal space and get into a close-quarters fight while talking, but that’s not going to happen!

"I won't listen! So, **Fireball**!"

BOOM!

"Gwah!?"

Having a fire orb explode right in front of them, Walter and the mage hurriedly retreated back up the stairs. Hmph! Too easy! Without a pause, I chanted the next spell—

"Mr. Walter, what have you been making such a racket about for a while now! You've woken up my child, haven't you!?"

Suddenly. At that high-volume voice that pierced the back of my head, I stumbled in spite of myself.

"——Wha——?"

I hurriedly turned around and there, in the open entrance, stood a woman with her hands on her hips and an angry expression. She didn't have the air of an organization member. No matter how you looked at her, she was a normal villager.

"Ahhh! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Ms. Lanchetta!"

Walter bowed his head repeatedly, then whispered to me in a small voice,

"...It's the neighbor, Ms. Lanchetta. She gave birth four months ago... and she's been a little on edge lately due to child-rearing. ——That's why I said let's change locations. Me."

You’re actually being quite considerate, aren't you.

He turned back toward this Lanchetta person, pointed at me, and said,

"I’m sorry. This girl insisted on fighting and started blasting attack spells..."

——Gack!?

"...Wh-a-a-at did you sa-a-ay...?"

Spin! Her face turned toward me.

"You, what on earth are you thinking!? I don't know who you are or what happened between you and Mr. Walter, but anyone should be able to tell that storming into someone's house and blasting spells is not what a decent human being does! If you cause any more trouble, I'll call the officials! Even if it's such a small village, there are officials sent from the Lord! What are you going to do!?"

"...U-umm..."

Being blasted with a tirade all at once, I was predictably overwhelmed and faltered.

"Yes! Do you think you can't answer me, or are you not taking me seriously!? Either way, fine! Then I'll just go and call the officials!"

Ranting one-sidedly, she turned on her heel and stomped away. Afterward, we were left behind—*plop*.

"...Child-rearing... is tough, isn't it..." That was my honest impression.

"...No... 'child-rearing is tough' is fine, but..." Walter rubbed the back of his head. "Shouldn't you run? Ms. Lanchetta is seriously going to bring the officials. If you get caught here, my return match will end halfway through."

"...Wha...! Why do I have to get caught!?"

"Because..." Walter pointed with his eyes at the shattered ceiling and charred stairs. "There’s evidence left behind that you 'blasted spells'..."

"That’s because...! Because you're running a criminal organization, to crush it...!"

"——Hmph. Do you think I'll tell the officials, 'She's right, we're actually a criminal organization'? Why should I waste the effort I've spent setting up headquarters here and deceiving the public until now? In other words. If the officials come here, I'll have to say this: 'That woman did it on her own. I don't know anyone like her.' Then——you understand, right? Who’s the one who gets caught by the officials?"

"...Mmm... Mmmgh...!"

It’s true, as he said, if the officials come, I'm at a disadvantage. I can't exactly beat down the officials, so for now, I have no choice but to retreat...

"I get it! I'll retreat quietly for now! But the next time we meet will be your end! Got it!?"

Saying so, I swished my cloak and left the place. ——This really feels like a villain's role—— I thought to myself.

"...Man... seriously, I had a rough time..."

At the unpopular tavern I had stopped at earlier, I took a breath with a glass of juice. I muttered to myself.

"——What happened? Were you able to go to the place you were looking for?"

When the old man at the shop asked, I sighed and—

"...Sort of... I managed to go, but..."

Before I could finish—*BANG!* The shop door opened with a flashy sound, and two shadows stood there with the midday sun at their backs.

"It's that woman! The one who blasted attack spells at Mr. Walter's place!"

"Hmph! So you’re the terrorist!?"

Pffft! I ended up spraying my juice everywhere. L-Lanchetta and Official Number One!

"Te... Terrorist...!?"

"Wh-a-a-a-t!?" Before I could raise a voice of protest, the shop old man screamed at the top of his lungs. "Come to think of it, this girl came here earlier and asked for the location of Mr. Walter's place!"

"Oh my! I knew it!"

"A premeditated crime! You!"

"...W-wait a minute!"

As I hurriedly stood up—

"Behave yourself!" shouted the official as he lunged at me!

But I am one who calls myself a mage and a warrior. Evading a tackle from an official with no combat experience is child's play. I shifted my body easily—*snap*. The official crashed into a table on his own, hit his head, and slumped to the floor. Then came Lanchetta's scream.

"Murderer!"

"Th... This girl, what a thing to do!"

"I didn't do anything! I didn't!"

"...Heh heh heh... I'll have you do your explaining in a prison cell..." Slowly, the official stood up again and turned a gaze filled with murderous intent toward me.

"Oh! He's alive!"

"As expected! Now, quickly, that girl!"

"No need to tell me!" Barking, the official lunged with another tackle.

"Listen to me!"

"No words needed!" In response to my shout as I dodged, he launched a third attack.

Agh! If it's come to this, I just have to run! I easily dodged the third tackle and leapt out of the shop.

"I won't let you get away!" The official immediately chased after me. "Wait, you terrorist!"

"Get caught peacefully!" ——Plus two more.

Wait, you people!

"What!?" "A terrorist!?" "What’s going on!?" "I heard Mr. Walter's place was attacked!" "What an outrageous person! Let’s get her!"

The commotion grew as I passed by, and before I knew it, more than ten villagers

were running after me! Eeeeek! This is no time to be running around leisurely! I quickly chanted a spell in my mouth—

"**Levitation**!"

Zing! Using a high-speed flight spell, I finally shook off the villagers—

The night mountains were filled with the sounds of insects.

——In the end—— After somehow shaking off the villagers, I had taken refuge in the nearby mountains. Of course, I know that completely forgetting about Walter and leaving this village as quickly as possible is the most rational way to go. I know that, but——to have gone through all that and pull back in silence is impossible! Even if it wasn't Walter who did it to me!

Thus, I hid here, planning a counter-strategy—but it seems I don't have much time. Looking at the village from here, between the trees growing on the mountain, the lights of torches were flickering here and there. ——Yes. A mountain search. Almost certainly, the target is—none other than me.

...Sheesh... A mountain search over a minor incident like that is so exaggerated... This is why rural villages with little entertainment... ——Wait, setting aside whether a mountain search is entertainment or not. Anyway, the advantage of terrain is with them. What should I do if I'm found? ——Hmm... in that case, maybe I should just take the villagers along... ——Ack! This is bad! I'm so cornered that even my thought patterns are becoming villainous!

While I was thinking that, several of the torch lights were definitely getting closer. ...Now, what on earth should I do...

Just as I thought that!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I've finally found you, terrorist! Give yourself up quietly!"

At the presence that suddenly appeared behind me and the familiar idiotic laughter that rang out, I couldn't help but furrow my brows!

(End of Part 1)

Next Episode Preview

Lina Inverse has finally been discovered by someone! Is there a way for her to escape!? Will the villagers' misunderstanding be cleared!?

And, for what it's worth, will Walter have a turn in the second half!? Come to think of it, the mage beside him didn't even have a name mentioned this time! Even though there was one in the setting stage!

Wait, wasn't this story originally supposed to be about a childhood friend plot!? It doesn't matter anymore! Leaving many problems behind, wait for "A Distant Day's Conclusion" (Part 2)! Next time!

A Distant Day's Conclusion (Part 2)

Synopsis

A man who has a deep past with Lina, his name is Walter Highland! Walter forms a criminal organization and throws a challenge to Lina!

Accepting the challenge, Lina heads to the organization headquarters, but is misunderstood by the villagers who don't know Walter's true identity, and instead becomes the one being pursued!

As Lina hides in the mountains, the fire of the search party's torches draws near! And at that moment! Who is the owner of the laughing voice that rose from behind!?

"I heard you've been doing all sorts of evil to innocent villagers! HOOOOOWEVER! Your evil deeds end here! It just so happens that I, Naga the White Serpent, was in this village..."

"Shut up."

Wham! Without letting her finish, my special move—the close-quarters Meteor Drop (also known as "throwing a rock" in some regions)—hit the source of the voice, Naga's face, squarely!

"Gfph!?" Groaning, she reeled back—and after a single moment, she revived and raised her face. "——Hey!? What are you doing so suddenly!? It’s not like you’re some small-chested mage... wait... you’re Lina!"

The one who finally noticed who I was after ranting was my self-proclaimed rival, the enemy of public order and morals, the well-known Naga the White Serpent!

"...Seriously! Appearing suddenly and without any context every single time! So? What is it this time? Are you being made to work for free because you skipped out on a restaurant bill? Or is it a favor to someone who saved you when you collapsed?"

Despite my cold words, Naga puffed out her chest.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Your reading is still shallow, Lina Inverse! I followed you secretly and, after understanding the whole situation, decided to participate in the mountain

search!"

"It's just a harassment move!?"

Whack! "Ubf!?" My second special move sank into Naga's head again.

"Hey Lina! Throwing stones at me over and over again! It hurts!"

"Shut up! If you 'understand the whole situation,' then do something about clearing the misunderstanding of the villagers!"

To my shout, she furrowed her brow slightly. "...Misunderstanding? Hmph! What are you talking about? It is an undeniable fact that you broke into the village's undertaker and blasted an attack spell!"

"...Undertaker... well... it certainly has that kind of name... 'Midnight Requiem'... But Naga, do you know? That's just a front, and it's actually the base of a criminal organization."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You make me laugh, Lina Inverse! Just because you're in a disadvantageous situation, you're trying to escape by calling the opponent a criminal!"

...So this girl... while saying she 'understands the whole situation,' actually doesn't understand it at all...

"...Listen, Naga..."

"Hmph! No words needed!"

"Then, no words needed for **Explosion Array**."

BOOOOOOOOM!

"L-a-a-a-ky-a-a-a-a-a!?" Mixing her scream into the explosion, Naga was blown away and slapped against a tree trunk—*thump*. After sliding down to the ground, she immediately—*shwing!*—revived.

"Hey Lina! Don't take people's words at face value! This is normally the scene where you try to persuade me and then get beaten by me one-sidedly, right!?"

"There is no such 'normal'! **Icicle Bullet**!"

K-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-ing! My cold spell froze Naga's entire body.

Alright. For now, I've silenced the annoying one. Even with Naga's revival speed, which has been getting notably faster lately, she can't do anything if her body is sealed in ice. Now then. Next is——

I looked toward the village and——

"Gack." I let out a small voice in spite of myself.

I saw the torch fires of the mountain search party gathering toward this direction one after another. ...U-umm... come to think of it, that attack spell just now might have made a bit of a flashy noise...

But if it's come to this, there's only one thing left to do! Namely! While the villagers are doing the mountain search, I'll storm into the village where there are few people, crush Walter's organization all at once, and run away! This is it!

Once decided, execute immediately! I chanted a spell in my mouth—

"**Levitation**!"

Using the high-speed flight spell, I soared into the night sky.

The small village lay silently in the darkness of the mountain valley. There were bonfires at the entrance and exit of the road through the village, but that was about the only light. At most, there was the faint lamp light leaking from the back of the windows of some houses.

And, just as I expected——most of the men in the village seemed to be out on the mountain search, as no one was seen on the streets. Alright! Then execute the plan smoothly!

I avoided the main street and made my way toward "Midnight Requiem." Of course, there was a possibility that Walter and his gang were also out on the mountain search, but if that were the case, I'd just take the treasure and retreat, and save the direct revenge for later.

I followed the same path I had taken during the day, moving silently, and reached the gate. Looking at the building, no light leaked from the windows, and it was as quiet as

if it were uninhabited. ——Well, whether it's truly uninhabited or not won't be known until I go in. Anyway, I just have to go. I took a step forward and——

"——!?"

In that instant. Sensing a tremendous killing intent flashing behind me, I reflexively jumped forward!

Whoosh! At the same time, something sliced through the night air, narrowly missing the back of my head! An ambush!?

I took some distance and turned around—and froze on the spot. ——It was a face I knew.

"I knew you'd come! You!"

Thud! The one who slammed a laundry pole into the ground and spoke was none other than the one who started calling me a terrorist during the day, the neighbor's wife Lanchetta, who's been a bit tired from child-rearing lately!

"...Why...!?" I was understandably flustered and asked.

She gave a small, derisive laugh. "Why did I know you'd come here? I heard from my dead grandmother that a suspicious mage using spells appears anytime, anywhere! I told the men going on the search, but no one believed me! You might be able to fool foolish men, but you can't fool me, who's been called 'Postpartum Psychosis Lanchetta'!"

"...Is that what you're called... like that... I mean, go to a hospital and get checked. That's what that is."

"What did you sa-a-ay! Are you making fun of me too!?"

"No, that's not it! I just, you know, wondered if you were okay..."

In response to my hurried follow-up, she gave a small, chuckling laugh. "...You... say the same thing as my mother-in-law..."

Eeeeek! I'm just a kid so I don't really get it, but I feel like this is just purely dangerous! I hate this type of person! Even though the opponent was just a single amateur housewife, I felt somewhat mentally overwhelmed.

"Anyway!" She pointed the end of the laundry pole she held—*zip!*—straight at me. "I'm

going to beat you here and show my husband and mother-in-law that I was right! Here I go!"

The moment she said that, she charged in, holding the bamboo pole like a spear!

"Whoa whoa!?"

Swish! Swish! Swish! I hurriedly dodged the tip of the pole as it pierced the wind. It was just an amateur's thrust—but the something like killing intent toward something I didn't know that was packed into the tip of the pole made the attack something not to be underestimated.

But I can't afford to waste time here either. As time passes, they'll notice the abnormality and other villagers will gather. Sorry, but I'll just settle this quickly and move on!

I chanted a spell in my mouth—

"**Ice Arrow**!"

Over a dozen arrows of cold air fired from close range were closing in on Lanchetta! But!

"Naive!" Her left hand went behind her, and something white she pulled from there sliced through the night sky, striking down every single one of my cold arrows!

——That's——!

"...A... diaper..." I was about to fall over, but I managed to steady myself at the last second.

She wore a grin. "This kind of spell is nothing compared to my mother-in-law's nagging and child-rearing!"

...Man... so it's actually tough... in many ways...

Even so, I can't afford to lose here! I took my sword, still in its scabbard, and said,

"Then, I'm going in for real too!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way!" Barking, Lanchetta ran!

Bamboo pole in her right hand, diaper in her left! Even if I dodged the strike of the

bamboo pole and jumped in, the diaper in her left hand would be waiting. Even if it was cloth, if she used it well now, it would be enough to tangle my sword. Then——

Whoosh! The wind roared in my ear. I dodged Lanchetta's bamboo pole by a hair's breadth. I jumped in just like that—just as I expected, her left hand holding the diaper was about to move, at that moment!

"Ah. A baby's crying voice."

"What!?" The moment she looked away at my words—*thump*. My swung scabbard hit the back of her head!

"...You... are a... demon..." ——That was—— the last thing Lanchetta said before she fell.

...Phew... that was a fruitless battle... Anyway, this battle is resolved! I swished my cloak, turned my back on the fallen her, and made my way toward the front entrance of "Midnight Requiem"—

——*Click*. A tiny, tiny metal sound in the darkness. It was the sound of the wire I held opening the lock of the front door.

...*Creeeeak*... The door opened with a slight creak. What dwelled within was only darkness. From the gap of the opened door, I slid my body into that lightless space.

"——Light." Chanting a spell for a magical light with reduced brightness and increased duration, I created it. What was illuminated by the pale light, similar to a will-o'-the-wisp, were only white walls and a ceiling.

Looking around, there was no sign of anyone—but without a doubt, someone was hiding somewhere. I hadn't known from the outside, but now that I was inside, I could definitely feel that presence.

Then first, I'll go for treasure-hunting while staying alert. Petty crooks like him tend to put their own room in a high place and want to keep the treasure by their side. So, I search the back of the second floor.

I climbed the stairs leading up from the lobby, muffling my footsteps. At the top was a hallway stretching straight back. The end was swallowed in darkness and couldn't be

seen well. ...Hmm...

I released the magical light I had created into the hallway. The light floated in the air, illuminating the doors lining both sides of the hallway, and continued further back—at that moment.

BANG! "HAAAUUUUUGH!" The doors on both sides opened and five or six men jumped out, brandishing their weapons, and dashed toward the light!

——Ah. I knew it. They probably intended to make it look uninhabited at the entrance, catch me off guard, and hit me from behind in this spot—but it’s an overly basic tactic. I had expected such a thing. That's why I sent the light ahead to serve as both illumination and a decoy.

Toward the backs of the men who stopped after realizing there was no one under the light—

"**Blue Magic Burst Wave**!"

DOOM! "Gwaaaaah!?" The blue shockwave I released easily knocked the men down and rendered them unconscious.

Hmph. Too easy. Beyond the open doors, there was no longer any presence of people. And the light I released stuck to—a single door at the end of the hallway.

Probably his room. I listened for any presence inside—then *BAM!* I threw open the door all at once!

I thought an attack might come as soon as I opened it—but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"——You've come..." Instead, the voice that came from the depths of the darkness was Walter Highland's.

"I’ve come for you. Since you weren't coming out because you were scared."

As if in response to my words, a small orange light was born in the darkness. Not a magical light. The color of a small flame lit on a lamp's wick—the one holding that lamp was a person in a mage outfit, with a black hood pulled low and a black robe covering their whole body.

It was the guy who was with Walter during the day. And standing proudly beside him

was, needless to say. The master of this mansion and the ruler of the criminal organization "Midnight Requiem," Walter Highland!

"However, I'm impressed you knew I was here. Didn't you think I might be participating in the mountain search?"

"If you were participating, I'd just have to crush this place first. That's just what I thought. Though——since we've met like this, the grudge for the candy taken in the past, the grudge for the jar broken, and the grudge for being framed as a terrorist! I'll pay them all back twice over!"

"Shut up! Me too, I'll clear all the humiliations I received in the past! Go, Morg!"

At Walter's voice, the mage who was beside him took a step forward.

"Listen well, young girl." With the lamp in one hand, the man called Morg said in a raspy voice. "My name is Morg. One who is well-versed in all knowledge and masters all arts of magic——because my power is too great, I do not use magic lightly, but if I were to once use the power of magic, not a single person would remain standing afterward... ...kukukukuku..."

He gave a muffled laugh, and I, scratching my cheek, said,

"...Hmm... then, why don't you try?"

At my flat response, he was silent for a while—and suddenly, he turned back toward Walter and—

"...I was hired with that pitch, but I'm sorry. That's a lie."

"WHA-A-A-A-A-A-T!?" At the sudden honest confession, Walter raised an incredibly loud voice.

It wasn't surprising. I had already realized that Morg wasn't actually a mage. The reason was simple. It was because he was using a lamp. There's no way a mage who can't even use a very simple light spell and goes through the trouble of using a lamp exists. So he's just someone dressed as a mage who can't even use simple magic. ...Walter didn't seem to have noticed at all though...

"Wait a minute! Being told such a thing suddenly here! I mean, why on earth did you tell such a lie!?"

"...No... I used to work for a merchant house, but it went under... I couldn't find my next job for a while, so I just happened to lie..." Morg became completely servile in his tone.

"'Just happened to lie'!? Anyway, now that it's come to this, it doesn't matter if you can use magic or not! Defeat Lina Inverse! Morg!"

"Ehh! It's impossible!"

"Do it even if it's impossible!"

"But, against someone who blasts spells without any consideration—" *Gfph*.

"Shut up!" Mid-sentence, with a flying kick from behind, I silenced Morg for the time being.

Hmph. Too easy. I glared at the remaining Walter squarely.

"——So? If you don't have any other pawns, you'll have to give yourself up, won't you?"

"...Urgh...!" Walter groaned and took a step back—

"——Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I've found you! Lina Inverse!"

"...It seems... it's not over yet..." At that voice that rose from behind me, Walter wore a smile again.

"**Ice Arrow**!"

Signaled by that voice behind me, I jumped to the side. The group of cold arrows flew past me and advanced toward Walter!

"Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa!?"

K-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-ing! The strike hit the wall behind the dodging Walter and froze over.

As for me, who had jumped to the side, at the same time as landing, I turned around—

"**Fire Arrow**!"

The group of flames released advanced straight toward the black silhouette at the

doorway—*BAM!* In that instant. The door was closed again. I see. Using the door as a barrier, huh. Then the door opened again—

"Hmph! Naive! Do you think such an attack works on me!? Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The person who appeared from behind the door—Naga the White Serpent—raised a sonorous, loud laugh. While having various parts of her body sizzle and char. ...She mistimed closing the door... this girl...

Well... as for it not working, it's just as Naga says though...

"I was careless in the mountains and got beaten, but it won't be that way this time! **Vibration Bullet**!"

KA-THOOOM!

"Shut up! This time I'll make sure you never stick your nose in again! **Earth Mine Burst**!"

BOOOOOOOM!

"Hmph! Try it if you can! **Fire Arrow**!"

Fwhooooosh!

Sizzle, burn, roar. The walls around us shattered, and the furniture and fixtures caught fire.

"Wait, you two! Don't fight in a place like this! My house will be destroyed! If you're going to do it, do it outside!"

"Shut up."

THUD! Silencing Walter, who was raising some voice of protest, with a double-kick, Naga and I glared at each other squarely.

True, the exchange of attack spells just now had caused cracks and holes in the walls, but that's a minor problem. I chanted a spell in my mouth while taking some distance from Naga—

"——Come out, terrorist!" "We know you're here!" "Give yourself up!"

Several voices could be heard—at that very moment. ——This is——!?

"...K-k-k-k-k-k-k-k..." Hearing those voices, while letting out a small laugh, Walter stood up on the spot. "...This is the end for you. ...It seems... the village folk who went on the mountain search have returned..."

"——Why are the villagers back——"

As I was about to say—I realized something. *Creeeeak*, I turned my neck and sent a glance toward Naga.

"...Naga... by any chance, you... when you revived in the mountain and were heading here, you didn't, like, run while laughing loudly... or something like that, did you...?"

"Hmph! Surely you're not going to say that was a bad thing, are you!?"

"You DID do it after all!"

Whack! Shouting, I threw a nearby vase at Naga's head. If a female mage in a weird outfit is dashing while laughing idiotically, anyone would wonder what's going on and follow her.

Walter put his face out of the hole in the wall we had made with the exchange of spells and shouted,

"The bandit is here! Help me!"

"Hey! You boss of a criminal organization! Don't ask villagers for help!"

"Hmph! Naive! Not choosing the means is exactly what makes one a criminal!"

"...Well, that's true... but what about pride...? I mean, even if I get beaten by the villagers... would that fulfill your purpose of 'surpassing me'?"

...*Twitch*. At my simple question, he trembled all over and, after freezing for a moment—

"——No, that’s, what should I say... if it's about defeating you with my eloquence and trust from the villagers, from a global perspective, even if I define it as me defeating you, I don't think it can be determined as entirely wrong."

He nodded repeatedly as if convincing himself. ...Hmm... he had indeed forgotten his

original purpose... this guy...

But the problem is—whether he forgot his original purpose or not, my situation hasn't changed.

"——Lina, everyone is oddly bloodthirsty." Naga said, looking out of the hole in the wall.

Tempted by her words, I also looked from a nearby hole in the wall—and the plot was packed with people holding torches!

Eeeeek! This is definitely a bit dangerous! I can't exactly blow away all the villagers with spells!

There's no other way but to let everyone know that I'm not a terrorist and that Walter is the real villain! But even if I just shouted, 'the real bad one is Walter,' there's no way the villagers would believe it.

Since he hasn't done anything bad in this village, it doesn't seem like I can find and present evidence... ——No! There is a way!

"**Black Magic Wave**!"

DOOM! I placed my hand on the wall and blasted a spell, shattering almost the entire surface of the wall. Now we should be visible from the outside too. And I called out in a loud voice to the lined-up villagers.

"Everyone! Listen!"

...*Murmur*... A moment of murmuring—then the villagers went silent.

"Don't you know!? Who it really is that threatens your lives!?"

...*Murmur-murmur*... At my words, the villagers murmured again for a moment.

"Wearing the mask of a normal person, usually smiley and friendly. But his true identity is. The boss of the criminal organization 'Midnight Requiem,' Walter Highland! It's you!"

Saying it clearly and distinctly, I pointed—*zip!*—at Walter!

But——

"——Hahahaha!" The one who laughed loudly at my words was none other than Walter himself. "Don't make me laugh! Me, the boss of a criminal organization? Even if you're cornered, that's a bit too desperate for an excuse!"

"——That's right, that's right!" "There's no way Mr. Walter is a villain!" "He even does his share of gutter cleaning properly..." "The other day, he even spent the whole day weeding in my place!"

In response to his words, voices in defense of Walter rose from among the villagers. ...Hmm... so this guy has been acting like a steady and serious person in a low-key way...

But!

"I have a witness!" Saying so, I dragged up Morg, who was lying in the middle of the room, and brought him to a place where everyone could see.

I shook him awake and said, "Now! Tell them! What kind of person Walter really is! ——Think carefully about what kind of treatment you'll receive from Walter after this for lying about being a mage!"

"Don't speak, Morg!" Walter hurriedly tried to cut him off, shouting in response to me.

——Hmph. Foolish.

"——Ho-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-u." I raised a finger—*zip!*—and said to the villagers, "Now here's a question! Walter said, 'Don't speak, Morg!' Why is it bad if he speaks!?"

...*Murmur*...! At my question, the villagers murmured.

"——Th-that’s——!" Walter thought for a moment, "...L-look! I'm a shy person, so I'm not good at having people talk about me..."

"Liar! There’s no way such an excuse works!" The murmuring of the villagers grew even louder.

"N-no! It's a misunderstanding! I'm an innocent general citizen! ...F-first of all!" Walter pointed straight at me, "You call me the boss of a criminal organization, but what on earth kind of crime did I do!? Say it specifically, specifically!"

...Ugh...! I was at a loss for words when he said that.

It’s true that he said he 'built a criminal organization,' but I don't know what kind of

things he did in that organization. Not missing the gap where I flinched for a moment, Walter went on the offensive.

"Did you believe such a rumor or joke that I'm the boss of a criminal organization and storm in here!? Since you did such a thing as jumping into someone's house and blasting attack spells, you must have some kind of evidence, right!? Tell me! Come on! What kind of crime did I do!?"

"——The carriage robbery in Smisoff Village. The sale of stolen goods in Seldross City. Profit-making kidnapping in Meso Village——"

Freeze! Walter's movements froze at that voice from the side.

"The robbery incident in Sairag, the dealings with organizations in Priam City... there were various others."

As she spoke, the one who stepped out between me and Walter was Naga the White Serpent! There it is! Naga's favorite, well-known, source-unknown, and inexplicable knowledge! I don't know why she knows such things, but this information tends to be strangely accurate.

"...Y-you, why do you know such things!?"

"Hmph! I had some idea about a criminal organization called 'Midnight Requiem.' But to say 'why do you know such things'... you've let it slip! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"...! Grrr...!?"

Walter hurriedly looked around, and there were only the cold gazes of the village people. He turned back toward me, pulled a knife from his chest, and said, "...Tsk! This is as far as I go...! But... I won't die for free!"

"Please die for free. **Fireball**."

DOOOOOOOOM!

"N-g-y-u-u-u-u-u-u!" Blown away squarely by the spell, Walter fell into the midst of the villagers who were lined up there.

"You! Were you deceiving us!" "I didn't think he was that kind of person!" "Give me back my youth!"

Shouting various things, the villagers rushed in and—

"D-o-n-y-e-e-e-e-e-e-e!" With Walter's second scream, for the time being, evil was destroyed.

"Hmph! Add a bottle of brandy and a lamb pie! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" Naga ordered additional items from the shop lady while quickly moving big shrimp butter-baked in a salt crust into her mouth.

The day after the incident was resolved. This was at a diner in some town.

"...Listen, Naga... I did say 'it's on me'... but if you order so excessively, I'll take those words back. I didn't have any income this time either..."

"Hmph! You're narrow-minded, Lina! If it weren't for my follow-up, the one who would have been put in jail might have been you. If you think about it that way, you should consider this cheap! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"...I mean, well... it's true, but..."

In the end, Walter was caught, my misunderstanding was safely cleared, and the situation was almost rounded off. However, with the village people there, I couldn't scour Walter's hideout and confiscate money and goods, so in the end, I had no income this time.

It’s true that I was able to corner Walter thanks to the information Naga gave. That's why I said 'it's on me' to at least treat her to a meal as a thank you, otherwise I'd be held to it for life... wait...

"...Wait a minute, Naga... you seemed to know their evil deeds very well... then why did you attack me in the mountains and such?"

"Hmph! That's obvious." Naga said, gulping down the brandy in her mug, "Until then, I had just happened to forget about their evil deeds."

"...Ho-o-o-o-u... so in other words... if you had remembered earlier and cooperated with me, the story would have been much quicker..."

"Hmph! Well, that's one way of looking at it..."

As she was about to say that—Naga finally noticed. The color of murderous intent in

the depths of my eyes.

And so. Today too, Naga flies through the sky by an attack spell.

Happily ever after, not.

(Distant Day's Conclusion: End)

Haunted Night? (Part 1)

"Gah!"

Thunder clapped, rewriting even the color of the darkness as lightning flashed across the sky, tearing through the air with a roar. It seemed to have struck somewhere very close. The rain, continuing to fall with a force that felt like a grudge against everything on earth, showed no sign whatsoever of stopping.

...This... was truly the worst.

Lina Inverse and her traveling companion—rather, that sponge, Naga—had set foot on this mountain around shortly after noon.

——*Be careful now. Mountain weather changes easily, you know*——

The old lady at the diner in the village at the foot of the mountain where they had stopped for lunch had said something like that.

——*We know. No need to worry.*——

Lina recalled listening to that advice with one ear while giving a careless nod. But she never imagined she would end up feeling the truth of those words from the bottom of her heart...

It was all the fault of that gang of bandits that had appeared in the middle of the road in the first place. After beating them senseless with attack spells, making them lead her to their lair, blowing away the ones holding down the fort, and then getting into an argument with Naga over the division of the treasure that resulted in an exchange of attack spells—while engaged in such a routine workflow, the rain had started, and she had lost her way.

——*Ugh*.

Trying to shield herself from the rain somewhat with her cloak, Lina wandered alone along the rainy mountain path, seeking a place where she could take shelter.

——Yes. Alone.

As for her companion, Naga, she had taken Lina's witty joke that "lightning won't strike you if you use Levitation" seriously, and just a short while ago, somewhere in

the distant sky, she had seemingly taken a direct hit.

Well, that’s life.

Setting such trivial matters aside, the problem was a place to shelter from the rain. Trees were, of course, growing all over the place, but they were all scrawny things with pathetic branches and leaves. They weren't nearly enough to keep the rain off. If she didn't do something soon, she might end up catching a cold.

While thinking this and continuing forward, just then—

Giga!

Lightning flashed in the sky, creating a giant black shadow for an instant in the darkness.

——?

Stopping, Lina strained her eyes in that direction. There—though she hadn't noticed it until just now—melting into the dark sky, a single large mansion stood in the rain.

"Excuse me! Is anyone there!?"

Even after banging on the door knocker repeatedly and calling out in a loud voice, there was no sign of anyone coming out of the mansion. Old blinds were down on all the windows. Even if a light were lit inside, it wouldn't leak out.

Yet, on the other hand, the possibility that this place was uninhabited was high. A single house deep in the mountains. It didn't look like it had been maintained for a long time. It was highly doubtful whether anyone was living in a place like this.

"Excuse me!"

...Hmm... it seems it might seriously be uninhabited...

If that's the case, even if she blasts the door open with an attack spell to shield herself from the rain for a moment, she won't be in the wrong at all! Probably!

Though good kids shouldn't imitate this!

Thus, Lina was about to chant an attack spell in her mind——

...*Creeeeak*...

The door creaked slightly just as she was about to start the spell. Before she knew it, a human presence had appeared on the other side.

...*Creeeeeeeeeeeak*...

Faint light leaked out from the slowly opening gap. Beyond the open door—

Holding a lamp with an incredibly gloomy expression, standing perfectly still, was a single woman in a maid outfit. Judging by her age, she was slightly older than Lina. She was a beauty with black hair, but dressed in a drab maid uniform and a cheap-looking apron, and more than anything, her expression emanated an eerie aura rather than charm.

.....

Lina was momentarily lost for words, while the woman stood there in silence.

——*Swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh*——

Only the sound of the rain was audible.

"...U-um..." In the end, it was Lina who spoke first. "Actually... I got lost... and I'm troubled because of the rain... If it's okay, I was wondering if I could shelter from the rain for a bit..."

"...You won't regret it, will you..."

"...Pardon...?" At the maid's words, spoken softly in a dark tone that seemed to echo from an abyss, Lina reflexively asked for clarification.

"...If you do not regret... knocking on the gate of this mansion... then perhaps... it is fine, I suppose... Heh... hehhehheh..." Saying so, she gave an incredibly meaningful-sounding muffled laugh.

...No... um... hey, lady... what do you mean by that...?

"...For now... please enter the lobby and wait... I will go ask the Grand Madame... hehhehhehheh..."

So——why the creepy muffled laughter?

It was incredibly bothersome, but before Lina could ask about it, the maid walked briskly away into the depths of the mansion. Since she had been told to wait, she couldn't very well follow. Lina entered the lobby for now and watched the maid's retreating figure.

...*Creeeeak thump*... The door behind her made a creaking sound and closed.

...*Rumble rumble rumble rumble*... The sound of thunder, like the sky letting out a

groan, could be heard through the door.

That empty lobby emanated a strangely creepy atmosphere. A dull-colored carpet, and portraits hanging on the wall. There was a chandelier on the ceiling, but it wasn't lit, and only a few candles were lit on wall sconces, barely providing any light.

And what was creepiest of all was that the faces on all the portraits hanging on the wall were painted over in stark black——

...Wait... could this place be... some kind of dangerous location...?

While thinking this, slowly, a faint light approached from the depths of the darkness. It was that maid who had vanished into the depths earlier.

"...Permission has been granted by the Grand Madame... It is okay for you to enter, apparently... I will guide you... so if you have the resolve, please follow me..."

"...No, um... resolve, what on earth...?"

Ignoring Lina's bewildered words, she walked briskly further and further into the depths of the mansion.

The heavy rain did not stop even when night fell.

...Phew...

Sitting on the bed, Lina let out a small breath.

——*Squeak*——

The bed she sat on squeaked slightly. Only the sound of rain occupied the world. In the end, because of this rain, she had requested to stay for one night and had been guided to this room by that maid.

...Honestly, she hadn't wanted to stay in a place with this kind of atmosphere...

Anyway, it was just creepy beyond belief. The "Maid's Waiting Room" she was shown to for changing out of her wet clothes was just an empty space with a bare stone floor and no furniture, and even when she said she wanted to greet the Grand Madame, she was told that she "doesn't much like meeting people."

The strangest thing was that in a mansion this large, where there were presences of people here and there, the only person she had seen face-to-face was the maid who had first appeared. When she was permitted to stay for the night and notified that "dinner is ready," she went to the dining room she was guided to, only to find herself

sitting alone at a long—a very long—table, with the maid in question serving her. When she asked about other people, she was brushed off with "they're busy with various things."

For that dinner, only a mysterious, gloopy stew and bread were served. Because it was incredibly creepy, she just gnawed on the bread the whole time. And then she was guided to this room on the third floor of the mansion.

Asking her to relax comfortably under these conditions was a fundamentally impossible request.

...*Hau*... Lina sighed again——

...*Knock*... *knock*...

The sound of knocking occurred just at that moment.

"——Yes." Lina replied——and silence fell.

.....

"——Come in." The room door wasn't locked yet. Lina said so——and silence again.

.....Oh, come on.....

Lina stood up from the bed and headed toward the door. There was no human presence on the other side. ——It shouldn't have been a hallucination, but...

...*Creeak*... Lina opened the door and looked out. There, long, dark hallways stretched to the left and right. The only light was from wall lamps. However, she could tell there was no one in the hallway. Only numerous doors were lined up——

...U... Ummm... it's just creepy, but...

If it's come to this, there's no other choice but the last resort. Namely: not thinking deeply. Saying to herself in her mind, "it's my imagination," she closed the door with a *bang*. Turning the key with a *click*, she turned around——and a woman, soaking wet all over, was standing right in front of her.

"Nogyeaaaaaaah!?" Lina screamed, pressing herself against the door behind her.

"...Hehhehhehheh... Were you surprised? Were you surprised?" The soaking wet woman said in the maid's voice.

"...W... Was I surprised!? How did you get in here!? How!?"

"...Hehhehhehheh... It was simple... Before guiding you, I unlocked the window of

this room... After you entered the room, I knocked on the door... dashed into the next room, went out the window and moved along the outside wall... While your attention was drawn to the door, I entered through the window... Thanks to that, I got wet from the rain, though... ...I knew you'd definitely be surprised..."

"Of course I would!" Lina was reflexively screaming.

...Man... executing such an elaborate prank... Certainly, there are people like this sometimes in the world. People who stake their entire existence on surprising others. But honestly, if she wasn't currently being allowed to stay, she'd want to blast her with two or three attack spells.

"...Since today's work is finished, I thought I'd come and chat with you a bit... hehhehhehheh..."

...So why does she have to give a muffled laugh every single time? This woman. Come to think of it, right now she was still wearing the same plain, blackish clothes, but she wasn't wearing the white apron and cap.

"...My self-introduction is late... I am Latina, the maid... ...Pleased to meet you..."

Shut up. Get out. The room will get wet.

——She couldn't say that, so reluctantly, Lina also gave a light nod. "...I'm Lina... Pleased to meet you too..."

"——By the way, how is it? This mansion. Doesn't it have a wonderful atmosphere?"

"...Ah... yeah... well..."

——The worst—— If she said her honest impression like that, she'd hate to be thrown out into the rain. Left with no choice, Lina spoke vaguely.

"...Isn't it? Isn't it? ...It truly seems as if it has some kind of backstory or curse..."

.....

"Huh?" Lina involuntarily asked. Backstory... or curse... you...?

"This atmosphere truly makes it feel as if the ground itself is completely cursed because it used to be a graveyard, an ancient battlefield, or an execution ground in the past! That's why I liked it and ended up working here! Hehhehhehhehhehhehheh!"

...C... Could it be that this is... one of those ghost story maniacs she'd heard rumors of! Someone who loves collecting eerie stories and flies over without hesitation if

they hear of a paranormal phenomenon anywhere, yet, if they actually experience something eerie, says something idiotic like "I've had quite enough of that experience" with a straight face! Not that it does any severe harm, but at the very least, it's the type of person you don't much want to become close friends with.

However, without noticing that Lina was creeped out, Latina spread both hands toward the room window.

"Especially on a stormy night like this!"

Zip! Rumble rumble rumble rumble! As if timed, thunder roared outside.

"The separate daily life and non-daily life mingle, and things not of this world lose their way, and for an instant, float out into this world—— Don't you get that feeling? Lina-san."

"Nope. Not at all." Lina shook her head vigorously left and right. Honestly, she was just really bad with this kind of ghost story.

"...Come to think of it... Among the stories I know, there is one like this..."

"I don't want to hear it! I don't want to hear it!"

"...Now, now... as a customer service on a boring night..."

"I hate that kind of service!"

——Lina's scream echoed through the Western-style mansion on this stormy night...

"...And the countless tiny baby faces growing densely on it said... 'Mother, save me, Mother, save me'..."

.....Do... Doooohhiiiiiieeeeee! At the ghost story Latina was telling, Lina couldn't take it anymore and collapsed onto the bed.

Since then——her ghost story customer service had continued endlessly. The night had deepened, but the rain outside showed no signs of stopping.

"...Right, right... speaking of babies, I also know a story like this... Thirty-sixth story, 'The Crawling Sound'..."

"I've been telling you! I told you I'm bad with those kinds of stories! ...I mean! There's no one who'd be happy being told ghost stories endlessly on a stormy night by a woman who's soaking wet! And for thirty-five stories straight!"

"...I see... It's what the proverb means by 'no means yes,' I suppose..."

"It’s not! In the first place, that's not a proverb, it's a superstition of men!"

"...Is that so... Come to think of it, you're right... A rainy night, an ancient mansion you happened upon... certainly, it can't be helped that you find it creepy, Lina-san... ...Her visiting that mansion was also for the exact same reason as you, Lina-san..."

"Don't smoothly start telling the story with that understanding face!" Lina involuntarily screamed——

——*Splish*...

That sound, like a large fish splashing, slipped into the moment of silence after Lina's scream vanished.

.....

Silence fell between the two. Even the sound of the rain that should have been audible vanished from their awareness for an instant.

".....I think it's my imagination... but just now... something..."

"...Beyond that door... wasn't it..." Fixing her eyes on the door in the back of the room, Latina said something creepy matter-of-factly.

Yes. In the back of the room she was guided to, there was a single door. Before she could check, Latina had come to the room, so she didn't know what was beyond it, but...

"...U... Um... I want to ask... beyond that door... what is there...?"

"——Do you want to ask——"

"...!?"

"——Do you truly wish to know...?"

——*Swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh*—— The sound of rain hit her ears again.

"...Uh... Ummm... I feel like I absolutely don't want to know, but I feel like if I don't ask, I'll be bothered by it forever, so... ...I'll ask."

"...It's a bath... Before you came to this room, Lina-san, I had the bathtub filled with hot water..."

"...Wh... What... Then isn't it just that sound? Don't deliberately act meaningful and scare me." The true form of the ghost was just that, huh. Lina gave a forced smile at

the anti-climactic answer——

"...I wonder what on earth splashed in a bathroom that should be empty...?"

——*Swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh*—— The forced smile froze as it was.

...Do... Dooohhiiiiiieeeeee! No! I hate this! I hate this place!

At Lina, who was holding her head and trembling, Latina directed a worried look.

"...Are you okay...? Lina-san... ...For a change of pace... Thirty-sixth story..."

"Stop it! That won't be a change of pace!"

...*Ooo... Oooooh ooo*...

"——And stop scaring me by making that kind of creepy voice!"

"...Creepy voice...?" Latina furrowed her brow slightly at Lina's words.

...Eh...? Lina held her tongue——

...*Ooh... Oooooh ooh*...

The voice was getting louder little by little. It was approaching. This way. It was definitely not one being made by Latina. Where it was coming from——

'.....'

The gazes of both Lina and Latina were directed toward the room door. The voice was coming from beyond it——from the hallway.

"...A... Are you, like, doing something elaborate again to try and surprise me, or something...?" Lina said to Latina, unable to take her eyes off the door.

"...No... I am..."

In the middle of her answer——

...*Nuu*...

A semi-transparent human shape suddenly appeared through the door!

'Nogyeaaaaaaaaaa!?' Lina and Latina involuntarily screamed——

"...Wait... what, it's just a ghost! Don't scare me! **Raywing**!"

Bophu!

Nyunyooooooooh..... With a single attack spell that deals damage to the mental

plane released by Lina, the shadow vanished, leaving only a scream.

"...Man... appearing at such a weird timing..."

"——Hey, what on earth are you doing, you!?"

Bohafu! A feather pillow held by the shouting Latina hit the back of Lina's head!

"Wait...! What's with you all of a sudden!?"

"It’s not 'what's with me all of a sudden'! What on earth did you just do!? What!?"

"...What... I just destroyed a ghost with an attack spell...?"

"That’s exactly it!" She pointed sharply at Lina. "With my ghost stories, wh-y-y-y were you so scared, yet when faced with a real ghost, you weren't even shaken and easily destroyed it!?"

"What are you saying that doesn't make sense? Ghost stories are scary stories—— But a ghost is just an enemy, and a weak one at that. Being scared by scary stories, and easily crushing weak enemies. I think that's a normal reaction."

"...I mean... if you put it that way, I feel like it makes sense... but I feel like something is wrong on a more fundamental level..."

"——I see. That weird water sound earlier wasn't a paranormal phenomenon or anything, and if I think of it as a ghost's doing, it's not scary at all."

"A ghost is a splendid paranormal phenomenon!"

"...Hmm..." At Latina, who was stubbornly persisting, Lina crossed her arms and groaned.

...Well, as she said, if it's strange, maybe it is just a tiny bit strange... but there was no helping it since scary things were scary, and non-scary things were not scary. ...Perhaps this part was some kind of trauma from when she was small, being told ghost stories by her older sister back home, and every time she made a logical interjection, she received physical punishment with the words "You have no sentiment!"...

"...Well anyway... it's certain that there was a ghost in this mansion. ——Latina, while working here until now, have you ever seen a ghost?"

"...Ah? Uh... Umm... Yes... or maybe not... rather... ...I felt like I sensed strange presences sometimes... but actually seeing one, this is the first time..." She gave a strangely unenthusiastic answer to Lina's question.

...Huu...m...? Lina stood up from the bed, scratching her head idly. "Regardless, in a place where ghosts are wandering around, I can't comfortably sleep. ——So. Since there might be others, I'm going to walk around the mansion for a bit and do some ghost extermination."

"WHA-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-T!?" At Lina's declaration, Latina involuntarily raised a scream. "Th-that's! That will be a problem!"

"Why will it be a problem? It’s much more of a problem having ghosts wandering around, right? The people of the mansion should be happy if they’re gone. Well, think of it as thanks for letting me stay for a night and giving me food."

"No, um, wait a second!" She dashed around to stand in front of the walking Lina, blocking the door. "Y-y-y-you can't do that, Lina-san!"

"Why? It’s not like I'm going to cause a massive commotion—— O-R I-S I-T♪ Is there something inconvenient about me walking around looking inside the mansion?"

"No, not at all, not in the least, but look, how should I say, publicly the Great Master is...!"

"Huh? Wasn't the master of this mansion called 'Grand Madame'?"

"Ahhh, it would be best for everyone to be happy if they could forget about those past matters!"

Hmph. As expected. Lina muttered internally. There is some kind of secret. In this mansion. A secret that would be bad if anyone knew.

——Come to think of it. No one face-to-face is seen by the guest except for the maid. This alone might be explained by the mansion's master being a misanthrope——but having the maid come to the room immediately upon entering and start an endless one-person ghost story festival is an overly unnatural story.

——There's no lack of arguments saying she should have noticed a bit earlier, but that's a promise not to say it. This behavior is as if——she wanted to kick Lina out, or was trying to make her not go outside from the room as much as possible—— Either way——

"Are you——hiding something?"

Twitch! At Lina's words, Latina's body visibly stiffened.

"W-w-w-w-w-w-what are you saying, that's so non-theoretical. Where in my behavior is there even a trace of suspicion?"

"I mean, it's harder to look for parts that aren't suspicious! Anyway! Tell me everything

you're hiding, or else step aside right now! It’s one of the two! Now! Which will it be!?"

"I... I understand!" Pointed at sharply by Lina, she panicked and was flustered. "I'll tell everything, I'll tell everything!"

"——I’m listening." Lina said——

——*Swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh*—— Only the sound of the continuous rain filled the time for a while.

"...And?" At Lina's prompting, she said in a flustered tone,

"Ahhh! Wait just a bit longer! I'm thinking about it right now!"

"I don't need a made-up story!"

Thwack!

"Pigyuu." Hit squarely on the temple by Lina's high kick, she collapsed flat.

...Man... causing me trouble... Lina dragged the fallen Latina away, removing her from in front of the door, and quietly stepped out into the hallway. The empty hallway she had seen earlier extended there, completely unchanged.

——However—— This mansion is quite large. A three-story building, and there might be an attic or a basement. Investigating every single place would be a tiny bit tedious.

...Hmm... And Lina thought of a plan.

Latina regained consciousness not long after that. Jumping out into the hallway in a panic, she looked left and right, and upon realizing Lina's figure was nowhere to be found, she dashed down the hallway into the depths. ——Lina quietly followed behind her. If the place is large, the story is quicker if guided by someone.

Incidentally, Lina was currently on the hallway ceiling. Using Levitation to float in the air, she was clinging to the ceiling. The lamps in the hallway were only shaded ones. It was naturally dim, and not much light hit the ceiling, making it perfect for hiding.

Lina followed behind her as if crawling on the ceiling. ——There was an argument saying this was much more like a paranormal phenomenon... but right now, let's a promise not to say it. Latina went down the stairs, heading down from the second floor to the first——and stopped in front of a single door. *Knock, knock*, she knocked on the door.

——After a short while——

"...It's me. The 'guest' said she was going to 'investigate the house' or something and left the room."

——Sensing murmuring on the other side of the door.

"I'll go look for her and stop her, so please stay hidden like this!" Saying so, in search of Lina's figure, she dashed away down the hallway again.

...Without ever realizing that if she had turned her face up just a little, Lina was right there. Estimating that Latina's figure had vanished down the hallway——

Lina cancelled the spell and landed in front of the door in question. The thick carpet laid down muffled the sound of her landing. Right now——there was no human presence on the other side of the door.

Lina put her hand on the knob and tried to turn it slowly without making a sound. As she expected, it was locked. In that case—— Lina took out two thin wires, an essential portable item for a young maiden, from her breast pocket, inserted them into the keyhole, and wiggled them. Before long, *click!* a small sound occurred, and the wire transmitted the feel of the lock being disengaged.

——Alright.

She put away the wires and opened that door slowly. Beyond it, a stairway leading down to the basement, occupied by a dim space, completely unchanged from the hallway. Descending while muffling her footsteps, at the bottom, a short hallway and doors lined up facing each other, and the presence of people beyond the door.

Carefully putting her ear to the door, she heard voices speaking on the other side.

——Hmm... just as she thought, huh... Lina chanted a spell in her mind——

"**Vibration Bullet**!"

KA-THOOM!

She blasted open the door right in front of her with an attack spell! And what was on the other side——was a scene exactly as she had predicted.

(Haunted Night?: To be continued)

Next Episode Preview

What is the secret hidden within this suspicious mansion!?

What was the sight Lina beheld beyond that door!?

And what are the contents of Latina’s 36th ghost story!?

Has Junji Ina○ released any new ghost stories lately!? (Irrelevant)

Come to think of it, Naga is still collapsed somewhere, and it’s undecided if she even gets an appearance next time!

I'll do my best to solve all the mysteries in the next installment! (Author's note)

At any rate, next time: **"Haunted Night?" (Part 2)!**

Wait for it... sort of!

Haunted Night? (Part 2)

Synopsis

While continuing her journey, Lina was caught in a sudden downpour deep in the mountains. Leaving aside Naga, who vanished after a direct lightning strike, Lina stumbled upon an old, massive mansion.

A bizarre atmosphere. A creepy maid.

While the maid, Latina, visits Lina's room to tell ghost stories under the guise of "customer service," a real ghost appears in the room!

——*There's something going on in this house*——

Acting on instinct, Lina stalks the suspiciously behaving Latina——and finally reaches a room in the basement!

...Silence...

Everyone except for me was frozen on the spot.

Every single face lined up there was colored with astonishment and terror.

"...Ah..."

The very moment someone tried to open their mouth:

"**Fireball!**"

ZUDOGOON!

My attack spell blew every single one of those men away.

"What was that sou—!"

Dogyo!

Without giving her time to finish her sentence, my right fist caught the charging Latina square in the face with a counter-punch.

"Wadadadadada!?"

She went flying and tumbling, but managed to push herself up.

"W-what was that for, Lina-san!? ...Wait! Why are you here!?"

She let out a sharp gasp as she realized the state of her comrades—all tied up or knocked out—inside the basement behind me.

"Ah! Everyone!"

"N-fufufufu. I've read the whole trick!"

Crossing my arms with a smirk playing on my lips, I made my declaration.

Behind me—where Latina's gaze was fixed—were the ten or so bandits I had just blasted with my spell.

That's right.

This place isn't some haunted mansion swarming with paranormal phenomena. It's just a plain old bandit hideout.

I'm aware that some heartless people refer to me by the involuntary nickname "Bandit Killer." Given that, there was only one conclusion:

"Someone in this group probably knew my face and the rumors. ...So, when you realized I'd come to shelter from the rain, you put on this 'haunted house' performance to try and scare me off. But because of the rain, we couldn't leave either, so you used Latina to keep me pinned in my room. Well, that's the gist of it, right?"

"...Guh...! You read the whole thing...!"

She gritted her teeth. Since none of the guys I'd blasted had woken up yet, she was my only conversation partner.

"My brother... the leader... he crossed paths with you once before. You stripped him of almost every bit of wealth he'd 'honestly' saved up from his bandit business back then! Because of that, our group of fifty scattered! We were chased out of our hometown, Raltigue, and I couldn't keep up my modest trade in stolen goods in town anymore, so we drifted all the way here... It's all your fault!"

"Are you an idiot!?"

Gomesh!

The sole of my right boot buried itself in her face.

"What part of banditry and fencing stolen goods is 'honest'!? People who are perfectly fine taking things from others shouldn't get their feathers ruffled when someone takes things from them!"

...Honestly! You see them a lot in this world: the type who find it absolutely intolerable when something happens to them, but are happy to do it to others. Generally, we just call them "villains."

I grabbed her by the collar, hauled her up, and asked:

"...So? Where are the rest of your friends?"

"...Eh...?" Latina furrowed her brow slightly.

"Your comrades, your comrades. There should be a sorcerer among you."

"...Th-there isn't anyone like that. Everyone except me was hiding in this room..."

"Hmph. Playing dumb won't work. The guys I took down have probably been in this room the whole time. ——Which means—— there must be a sorcerer somewhere who summoned that ghost that appeared in my room!"

At my words, Latina's brow furrowed even deeper.

"...W-what are you talking about... That was obviously just one of the guys in a costume trying to scare you..."

"A 'costume' can't phase through a door! And besides! That thing vanished when it got hit by my spell! No matter how you look at it, that was a real ghost!"

"...No way..."

The color drained from her face in an instant. ...Wait... don't tell me...

"Eeeeeeek! No, no, no! H-hieeee! A GHOST!"

Her knees started knocking together, and she collapsed, clutching her head.

...Ah. I thought so. This person has never actually encountered a real ghost.

...Sigh...

I let out a small breath.

"...Still... you're a weird one. Fine with ghost stories, but terrified of a real ghost..."

"This is the normal reaction! ...Which means... this place really is a haunted mansion!? Nothing happened the whole two months we lived here! ...Or is it because

of the storm!? Ever since something bad happened on a stormy night, every time a night like this comes around... or something...!"

She had completely forgotten about her comrades and her own position, muttering to herself.

...Hmm... judging by this, it doesn't seem like she’s playing dumb...

"——Latina, calm down! Anyway, do you really know nothing about that ghost? You’ve never seen it or heard rumors until now?"

"I don't know! I haven't... wait! Maybe..."

"What? Have a lead?"

"...One of my comrades once said... he saw a figure vanish into the wall inside this mansion... But since the person who said it was someone who always enjoyed scaring people, no one took him seriously... I only listened to it because I thought it was just a ghost story..."

"——So it was true."

Latina nodded gravely at my words.

"...I see..."

I thought for a moment, then held up a finger.

"Why the ghost was here, and whether it was just the one I took down in my room... ——Either way, there’s only one thing that’s perfectly clear."

"——And that is?"

"I’m confiscating all the treasure you guys have stashed away."

"Are you a demon!?"

Latina’s tearful scream echoed through the basement.

"...U-uuuh... I hate this... What if another one of those things comes out..."

"Come on now. Stop whining and keep moving."

I prodded Latina, who was advancing timidly while muttering complaints.

In the end——

Responding to my very sincere persuasion—which was: "Whether you're scared of

ghosts or feel a sense of duty to your comrades, if you don't lead me to the treasure, I'll blast you with attack magic until you're dead"—she graciously agreed to guide me through the mansion.

However, perhaps because the shock of seeing a ghost was still lingering, her pace was incredibly slow.

Granted——a massive, empty mansion is a bit creepy, and the rain and lightning outside are still going strong. It’s certainly a situation overflowing with a horror-movie mood——but I wasn't obligated to humor her fears.

"It feels scarier because you’re thinking about how scary it is. Just think about something else to distract yourself."

"...S-something... else...? Then... th-that’s it! Skipping the 36th story, the 37th story: 'The House Where No One Is'... It's just perfect for walking through an empty mansion..."

"GET AWAY FROM THE GHOST STORIES! Why are you trying to build up the atmosphere!? That doesn't help as a distraction at all! ...Wait, was your love for ghost stories actually genuine, not just an act...?"

"What are you saying?"

At my question, she puffed out her chest with pride for some reason.

"Do you think I could tell ghost stories of that quality and quantity with a shallow, half-baked performance? That was the result of me collecting various stories from all over since I lived in town! I might not look it, but back in town, I used to tell ghost stories to the neighborhood kids and make them cry so much their parents eventually complained!"

"...I mean... that’s not really something to brag about..."

I scratched my cheek. Regardless, I couldn't let another ghost story festival start here.

"...A-anyway! No ghost stories! Just lead me to the treasure!"

"Eeehhhhh... I was planning to tell a hundred of the best stories from the collection I worked so hard to gather, all in one go..."

"I don't want to hear them! If you want to tell them so badly, tell them to your bandit buddies!"

"I can't. They all run away halfway through or beg me to stop while crying... I can only ever get up to about story fifty-seven, so I have this huge backlog of great stories I’ve

been saving for the finale..."

"Don't tell them! Throw that backlog away!"

"How could you... then all my hard work up until now...!?"

She suddenly gasped and froze in place. Her gaze was fixed on the darkness ahead, and her knees were trembling slightly.

——Which meant——

I turned my eyes in that direction too.

A long, dim hallway. Flickering lamp light.

In that hallway——before we knew it—a little old lady was standing there.

Staring at us with wide eyes.

Muttering something softly to herself.

——Obviously, she wasn't a normal human.

No one had been there a moment ago, and there was no reason for an old lady to be wandering around a bandit hideout.

In an instant—

The old lady put her hands and feet on the wall and started crawling toward us at a bizarre speed, like a giant spider!

"Hieeeeeeeeeee!"

Latina's scream echoed around us!

"For such bad taste: **Blue Magic Blast**!"

Kou!

The shockwave of blue light I released hit the granny ghost directly——

Kiuuakhieeeeeee!

Letting out an inhuman death rattle like a giant insect creaking, it writhed and vanished.

Hmph. Easy.

"NOOOOOOO! I CAN'T TAKE THIS ANYMORE!"

"I told you it's fine. I took care of it, Latina."

"I hate this place!"

However, the recent scare must have been too much; she stayed crouched on the floor, shaking her head at my words.

Good grief. What a pain.

——Though, this situation was certainly abnormal.

Ghosts that supposedly almost never appeared had started popping up all over the place tonight of all nights——

It was too unnatural to dismiss as a coincidence or the fault of the storm. It felt more like someone was controlling the ghosts to achieve something.

Latina said there were no sorcerers among her comrades, but that might not be true. She could be lying, or there might be someone else in the mansion she didn't know about.

——Someone——

——Yes... for example——Naga the White Serpent, who vanished after being struck by lightning before I reached this mansion!

...It’s possible... very possible...

Taking my joke seriously and getting struck by lightning, she’d hold a grudge and claim it was my fault, sharpening her claws for revenge——

Maybe she planned to scare me at first, but after finding out Latina and the others were bandits, she decided to hog the treasure for herself and summoned ghosts to pin us down...

Naga knows plenty of weird techniques, so summoning and controlling ghosts is probably within her reach.

Thinking about it that way, it’s starting to feel like that’s it! Which means! If I dawdle here, all the treasure will be snatched away!

I grabbed Latina by the collar and forced her to stand up.

"Even if you’re scared, ghosts are going to show up when they show up! So we might as well finish what we need to do and then get out of here! Now, to the treasure room...!"

I trailed off and looked around frantically.

The dark hallway. The dark ceiling. Windows closed with old blinds.

There was no sign of anyone.

A thought had occurred to me. Heading straight for the treasure room was definitely not a good strategy.

——If the area to search is too large, the shortest path is to have someone guide you——

What if Naga was trying to do exactly what I had just done?

If Naga realized Latina was part of the bandit gang, it was safe to assume she was tracking our movements somehow. In which case, the moment we reached the treasure room—or the moment we carried the treasure out—there was a high probability she'd launch a sneak attack with magic and try to take it all for herself.

In other words, approaching the treasure room carelessly was a bad idea.

So——the plan was to find Naga and beat her up first! Getting the treasure would come after that!

"Latina! The trip to the treasure is on temporary hold!"

"...Eh...?" Latina looked back at me with a bewildered expression.

"Anyway, let's go!"

I couldn't leave her here. If Latina fell into Naga's hands, I'd definitely be beaten to the punch.

I pulled her hand to start running, but she resisted.

"Where are we going!? I don't want to! I'm not moving around this ghost-infested place without an explanation!"

"There's no time for explanations! Just come with me! Otherwise, my attack spell... I mean! Misfortune will befall you!"

"Isn't that just a threat!?"

"I know!"

At my immediate, brazen reply, her face changed slightly.

"...I... I get it...! I just have to follow you, right!? I'll follow, but please explain the

situation! Otherwise, I’m going to tell the stories leading up to the grand finale of my Best 100—from story ninety, 'The Thing That Peeped,' all the way to the end in one go!"

...Ugh...! That sounds... unpleasant...

"F-fine! I’ll explain!"

As I started walking, she followed quietly this time.

"...Basically... it seems like there’s someone else in this mansion besides you guys and me, and they’re summoning and controlling the ghosts..."

As I spoke, I opened a nearby door to check inside. An empty, unlit room. No sign of anyone, and no treasure either. I closed the door and moved to the next one.

"——So, first we find that person and take them down. Got it?"

"...I understand... but..."

"But—what?"

"It didn't seem like an explanation that warranted saying 'there’s no time for an explanation'..."

"Shut up! It doesn't matter! Let's just hurry!"

"...O-okay... If it’s about taking down someone who summons ghosts, I’ll help."

"Good! Then the search is on!"

And so——Latina and I began our investigation of the mansion!

"...But... is there really such a person...?"

Latina murmured this after some time had passed since we started our search. We had been searching room after room, blasting the few ghosts that appeared with attack spells, and dragging the terrified Latina along, but...

Still, we hadn't seen anyone. If the opponent were Naga, I would have expected to hear her meaningless, idiotic laughter echoing by now...

"They’re here. Definitely."

I answered firmly. To be honest, I was starting to lose a bit of confidence, but if I said that, Latina would obviously start throwing a tantrum again, saying "I knew it was

some kind of curse."

"Otherwise, there’s no explanation for why so many ghosts appeared tonight of all nights. The situation is too unnatural to be dismissed as a 'curse' or 'fate.' If someone is summoning them, and we just leave them be, this whole mansion will be crawling with ghosts. Is that what you want?"

"No, no!" She shook her head vigorously.

"Then help out without complaining."

"...O-okay... wait...! Here...!"

"——What’s wrong?"

I looked at her as she suddenly spoke up and stopped. A long hallway lined with doors. The scenery was the same as everywhere else... Of course, we had been moving. In these massive mansions, every floor and hallway tends to look the same.

"...This place... I’m sure of it... This is where my comrade saw that ghost-like thing!"

She spoke in a trembling, frightened voice.

"This is it?"

She nodded.

"...The east hallway of the second floor... I’m positive... He said a figure vanished into the wall at the end of this hallway...!"

...Hmm...?

"——Let me ask again—— Excluding today, was that the only time a ghost was sighted?"

"...As far as I remember... that’s it. If there were other ghost stories, I’d probably remember them..."

I see. A true ghost story maniac indeed. ...Which means... maybe...

"——The wall at the end—— you said."

I strode down the hallway.

"——Ah! Wait! Don't leave me behind!"

Latina scrambled after me. Reaching the end of the hallway, I rapped on the wall with my fist. ...Hmm... just as I thought...

"...What are you doing, Lina-san... wait, don't tell me...!"

"Exactly."

I took a few steps back and chanted a spell in my mind——

"**Vibration Bullet**!"

KA-THOOM!

The strike I released smashed the wall, revealing the darkness beyond. Not the darkness of the night, but a deep darkness leading downward. Yes—behind the broken wall, a set of stairs stretched down.

"...A secret passage...?"

I nodded at the murmuring Latina.

"...It was well hidden. But there really is someone in this house. ——Let's go."

I started slowly descending the stairs. Latina followed a step behind. I had thought it was Naga, but someone hiding in a secret passage that even Latina and the others didn't know about—there's no way it's Naga.

Then who on earth—?

At any rate, there was no doubt I couldn't afford to be careless.

The bottom of the stairs was slightly brighter. Glowing moss had been planted on the walls, just enough to see your feet.

How long had we been descending? It felt like we'd passed the first floor and gone to the basement——no, maybe even deeper, like a second basement floor——

There, we found a single door.

Latina and I looked at each other, nodded, and——

BAM!

Threw the door wide open!

It was a massive basement room. Lab equipment, books, rows of shelves——and in the center of the room was a man.

He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties. A sorcerer-looking guy in a gray robe and a gray hood.

"——Wh... why...!?"

The man’s eyes widened in shock as he yelled.

"Why are a maid and a female sorcerer in a place like this...!?"

...Well, yeah... it is a weird combination if you think about it... us...

But anyway!

I pointed sharply at the man.

"You’re the one who’s been summoning ghosts indiscriminately and letting them loose in the mansion! I’ve taken down every last one! Resistance is fut—!"

"HIWAAAAAAAGH!"

Without listening to me, the man let out a pathetic scream and bolted from the room.

You see them a lot! People who love pestering others from a safe distance, but lose all their courage when faced head-on! But! I had no intention of letting him escape!

I started chanting a spell——

But before it was finished, as he ran, the man grabbed a small jar of medicine from a nearby table and threw it at us. ——Wait, could it be!?

"Get down!"

I aborted my spell and leaped at Latina, using her as a shield!

Crank!

The hard sound of ceramic breaking. And then—— ...nothing happened.

"...Huh...?"

I thought it was going to explode or something... but he just threw an object!?

Looking up, I saw the sorcerer crossing the room and going through a door in the back.

"——Wait, Lina-san, did you just use me as a shield...!"

"You won't escape!"

Ignoring Latina’s protest, I scrambled after him.

Opening the door shortly after the man, I found two mud dolls.

Ugh! In the way!

"**Vibration Bullet**! And another **Vibration Bullet**!"

Goba! Gaba!

With a double-tap of attack spells, the golems shattered quite easily. There was nothing else in the room. No sign of the man from earlier. Instead, another door at the far end.

"In there!?"

Dashing to the door and opening it, I found four golems!

.....THEY INCREASED!

"Ugh! I just have to do something about them, right!? Anything! So, **Freeze Arrow**!"

Koki-koki-kiiiiiin!

Hit directly by more than ten arrows of cold air, the golems stopped moving. The room layout was the same as before. A door on the opposite side... wait, don't tell me...

I dashed over and opened the door——

Clack.

I shut it again instantly.

——They were there. Just as I thought. More golems in the next room.

And they'd increased in number again. Looking at it, there were about seven or eight. And another door at the far end of the room.

If the golems kept doubling like this, would there be sixteen in the next room!? Of course, mere golems are no match for me, but the priority was chasing the man who'd escaped. If I dealt with every single golem, he'd definitely get away. ——Which meant——

"...Phew... I think... if I've made it... this far..."

Gasping for breath, the man muttered in the dark forest. The pouring rain soaked his robe. The night sky was covered in thick rain clouds, and the only light was a tiny magical light he had just created.

Toward that light——

Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!

DOGESHA!

My dash-and-jump-kick exploded!

I stomped onto the back of the man who'd collapsed onto the wet ground with a scream.

——The method for getting ahead of him was quite simple.

All the rooms with golems were connected in a straight line. That being the case, the man's exit to the ground level had to be on the extension of that line. I used a Spirit Path spell—a tunnel-digging spell—to reach the surface and kept watch around where I thought the exit would be. The man waltzed out and carelessly lit his magical light.

"Hah! You can't escape anymore!"

"H-hieeeeeeeeee!"

At my victory declaration, the man let out a pathetic scream.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! You can use the mansion as much as you like! I'll leave right now! I won't tell anyone, of course! So please, just spare my life!"

".....Huh?"

I let out a blank-sounding reply to a conversation that was strangely out of sync.

"No way! No one was living there!"

Latina raised a voice mixed with suspicion and surprise at the explanation from me and the sorcerer. The location was the first lab. After leaving Latina there, I'd brought the sorcerer back with me.

At her words, the sorcerer shook his head timidly.

"...No... I lived mostly in this basement... because, you see... isn't a massive, empty mansion a bit creepy...?"

"...Wait... you're a necromancer, aren't you?"

At my interjection, the sorcerer scratched his head.

"Well... yeah, but... scary things are still scary, you know. And besides, the experimental environment is more stable in the basement... I only bought this

mountain mansion because of this secret basement anyway..."

"——So, while you were cooped up in the basement experimenting——"

I pointed sharply at Latina.

"Your gang of bandits moved in, assuming the place was vacant."

"It was terrifying!" said the sorcerer. "After all, these scary-looking people started coming to my house in groups and suddenly settled in..."

"You didn't have the guts to protest to their faces. But since it was a house you'd bought, you weren't satisfied with leaving... Every now and then, you'd come out from the secret passage to check on the situation in the mansion... but the bandits showed no sign of leaving... ——Latina, the 'ghost' your comrade saw was probably just him entering the secret passage or something. You used another exit that leads from the basement into the mountains for buying food... but when you ran into this storm today, you hit on an idea. ——Right?"

The sorcerer nodded gravely.

"...Yes... I thought if I summoned a bunch of ghosts and let them loose, you'd all get scared and leave..."

It just happened to coincide with my visit.

"...So that's what happened..."

Latina said with a sigh of relief, then glared at the sorcerer.

"Honestly... what a troublemaker!"

"YOU GUYS ARE THE ONES IN THE WRONG! In the first place!"

DOGAKI!

My kick sank into the top of his head.

"——Well, the mystery is solved. So, let's get back to business and go confiscate all that treasure you've stashed away, shall we?♪"

"NOOOOOOO! YOU REMEMBERED THAT PART!"

Dragging the screaming girl, the sorcerer and I set off to look through the treasure.

And then, the long, long night ended.

The mountain morning after the rain was filled with the scent of greenery.

——In the end,Since I was the one who defeated the bandits, I took the choice bits of the treasure, and the sorcerer took the rest as compensation. As for the captured Latina and her gang, he’d turn them over to the nearby guards later.

At any rate, looking back, I got soaked in the rain, but I also got some income, so overall, I guess it’s "happily ever after," more or less.

——Oh, one last thing. ——

I’ll just note that shortly after setting out, I found Naga charred and collapsed on the mountain path.

(Haunted Night?: The End)

Beast Strike

I was used to sudden attacks.

When you’re even a little famous like I am, people show up thinking, "I’ll make a name for myself by defeating you," or villains you beat before come back for a grudge-fueled return match.

Ambushes on the highway, night raids at the inn.

These days, if I let every little thing rattle me, I wouldn't last long.

I wouldn't, but still——

GASHASHAGASHAAAN!

With a spectacular crash, several plates shattered against the floor.

Along with a massive amount of food.

"Hinyuwaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

At the tragic end of the food we hadn't even eaten yet, Naga and I screamed in unison.

If I hadn't instinctively grabbed the plates of braised lamb and warm vegetable salad to save them, I would have been clutching my head in despair.

No matter how used to being attacked I am, a sneak attack during a meal is the one thing I cannot forgive as a human being!

We had just finished a job and were enjoying a slow dinner——when it happened.

The moment Naga and I sensed the killing intent and leaped away, a magical strike pulverized the table where we’d been sitting.

...Silence...

The sudden violence caused the crowded restaurant to go dead quiet.

the killing intent and the spell had come from near the entrance, around a table where three old men were sitting.

Of course, they weren't the ones who did it.

But as for any other suspicious figures——

"Heh heh heh... Found you... Lina Inverse! And Naga the White Serpent!"

A voice rang out.

Simultaneously, something made a great leap and landed right on the table the old men were gathered around!

——*Stir...!*

The customers murmured in shock for a second before falling silent again.

The thing that appeared on the table was——

A single beast.

Its eyes were fixed straight on us.

"...Wh..."

Someone's leaked voice broke the heavy silence.

Triggered by that, the customers began whispering to one another again.

"...Why a Chihuahua?"

"That *is* a Chihuahua... right?"

"Don't tell me... the one who just spoke was...?"

——Yes——

Standing on the table, staring us down arrogantly——panting with its tongue out and wagging its tail like crazy was none other than a fluffy, soft, pet-shop-grade Chihuahua.

"Listen well!"

Ignoring the surrounding confusion, the Chihuahua pointed sharply with its right front paw! ——Actually, it kind of wobbled.

"Fear me, and despair! I hereby declare! Your lives will surely be claimed by me in due time!"

.....

At that, Naga and I looked at each other in silence for a moment.

"The... Chihuahua?"

"What's with this nonsense? Surely you haven't forgotten my voice already!?"

"Voice? You mean that kid-like voice...?"

"Kid-like!?"

The Chihuahua trembled slightly.

"...Hmph... Perhaps the quality of the voice changed due to some interference while using sorcery to transmit it. Then let me introduce myself properly! My name!"

It tried to stand tall with its arms crossed——or so it seemed. The Chihuahua wobbled up onto its hind legs, letting its front paws dangle limply.

Ugh. It's incredibly "pretty" (cute).

One of the waitresses was even staring at it with watery eyes, whispering, "Aww, so cute~"

The Chihuahua continued regardless.

"My name is Bazuel! Bazuel the Demon! Chancellor and supreme master of the society, Twilight Illusion!"

"Ah. I think I remember something like that."

"Really? I don't recall."

Naga and I said, looking at each other.

The job we had just finished was guarding a certain princess, and the organization that had attacked her was indeed called something like that.

And the leader was some guy named "Bazuel."

...He wasn't a Chihuahua, though. Obviously.

"Don't say it so casually! Get excited! Be shocked! Be terrified!"

"No... if I honestly acted scared because a Chihuahua told me to 'be terrified,' I'd lose my reputation... or rather, I feel like I'd be failing as a human being... ——Speaking of failing as a human—— did you turn into a Chihuahua because Naga and I beat the stuffing out of you?"

"What kind of logic is that!? As if that would happen! This is my familiar, Pes!"

"Wow. That's a remarkably normal name for a dog."

"I didn't think the time would come to use him in the field... Regardless! Using the

sorcerous techniques I have researched and developed, it is possible to converse through a familiar like this, and even fire attack spells! This is the ultimate 'God of Presence'! A supreme assassin with the athletic prowess of a wild beast, moving exactly as I command as if it were my own limbs!"

"Wild beast? Really?"

"A Chihuahua is... not that..."

Whether Pes——or rather, Bazuel——heard us or not, he kept going.

"Because of you, the name of my organization has fallen to the earth, and my mother——I mean, Langasha—is bedridden with gout!"

"Yeah... I get the feeling that part isn't entirely our fault, but I doubt this Lapdog Man is listening."

"Therefore, this is retribution!"

He wasn't listening.

"Treading over your names and corpses, we of the Twilight Illusion shall leave our mark on the history of darkness and take a new step forward!"

"Ah, right, right."

Giving a half-hearted response, I pulled over a nearby chair, sat down, and started eating the food I was still holding in my hands.

"For now, consider this merely a death sentence! I could destroy everything right here and now... but by leaving uninvolved witnesses, our name will rise on the lips of the people and be etched as an eternal terror!"

With that parting shot, the Chihuahua hopped off the table and trotted toward the exit, but since it couldn't open the door, a kind person nearby opened it for it.

And then, the brown fluff-ball vanished from the shop——

The people left behind were silent for a moment——

Clap-clap-clap-clap-clap!

With thunderous applause and gazes of admiration, small coins began being tossed toward Naga and me.

"That was hilarious!"

"I see. This kind of promotion works too!"

"It really looked like the dog was talking! That's amazing!"

"When's the first performance!? I'm definitely going to see it!"

They spoke to us in a friendly, boisterous manner.

.....Uh.....

Apparently, because of Bazuel's organization name, "Twilight *Illusion*," and Naga's bizarre outfit, they had mistaken the whole thing for a publicity stunt for a circus or a magic show.

...Well...

The misunderstanding was their own fault, and I saw no reason to return the coins they'd thrown.

"Yeah, thanks, thanks."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Muttering nonsense, Naga and I scrambled to pick up the coins.

The total was actually more than enough to cover the cost of the ruined meal.

Thank you, dog. You're wonderful, dog.

Even if I forget Bazuel's existence, I will never forget Pes's fluffy "prettiness" and the taste of the meal I got to eat thanks to him——

The End…?

Summary

Lina and Naga were accustomed to sudden ambushes—it comes with the territory of being famous (or infamous). But even Lina has her limits, and interrupting a peaceful meal is an unforgivable sin. Mid-bite, a magical attack shattered their table, sending their dinner flying.

The culprit? A tiny, fluffy, tail-wagging **Chihuahua** named Pes.

Through the dog, the voice of **Bazuel**, leader of the "Twilight Illusion," declared a vendetta against them. However, because of Naga's strange outfit and Bazuel's dramatic flair, the restaurant patrons mistook the whole thing for a circus act,

showering Lina and Naga with tips. Lina happily pocketed the cash, deciding that while she'd forget Bazuel, she'd never forget the delicious meal the "pretty dog" paid for.

A killing intent emerged.

From deep within the bushes.

Instinctively, Naga and I leaped in opposite directions.

GUGOOO!

A spear of fire struck the ground where we had stood just a moment before, turning into an inferno that scorched the air.

It was a quiet afternoon.

We had been walking down a mostly deserted highway, chatting about nothing in particular.

"Who is it!?"

"——'Who,' you ask? Quite a greeting. It's obviously me."

A child-like voice came from the bushes where the spell had been fired.

And then——

Rustle...

Emerging from the leaves was a single, tiny, brown fluff-ball.

"Pes!"

Naga and I yelled in unison.

Yes. It was Pes, the generous Chihuahua who had appeared two days ago, put on a show, and basically given us all that tip money.

"Don't call me Pes. Call me... Bazuel."

At Pes's words, Naga and I looked at each other, furrowed our brows, and said:

"...Who?"

"OI!"

Pes stood skillfully on his hind legs and made a sharp "straight man" pointing gesture

with his right front paw.

"You're not going to tell me you forgot about me in just two days!?"

...Uh...

I thought for a moment, then clapped my hands.

"Oh! That's right! I remember now! You mentioned you were doing part-time work as a familiar for that Bazuel guy, didn't you, Pes?"

"NO ONE SAID THAT!"

"...Oh? Well, whatever. So, what do you want?"

"What do I want? Quite a greeting. Or do you intend to keep playing dumb? I told you. I will defeat you."

"Hmph. Listen to what's coming out of your mouth."

Naga let her hair flow in the wind.

"What's the point of saying that now? The business from two days ago was finished then."

"IT IS NOT FINISHED!"

"Eeeh!? It wasn't finished!?"

I couldn't help but ask back at Pes's scream.

"In my mind, the moment I collected the tips from the customers and finished my dinner, it became a page of the past..."

"Tips? What are you talking about? Anyway, don't just decide it's in the past! You weren't listening to a word I said, were you!?"

"...'Person'... well... you're a dog..."

"Don't nitpick! That was merely a preview! A challenge! The real battle starts now!"

"No, I mean... having a cliché line used by a bard who gets a bad reaction from the crowd and tries to force an ending to his story used on me so suddenly..."

"It's not sudden! I told you two days ago...! Gaaah! Fine! Whatever! Here we go!"

Ignoring our opinions, the dog suddenly began chanting a spell——

"**Beast Demon Howl**!"

He released the "Words of Power"!

Magical light etched a trail through the air, drawing an inverted pentagram!

A shadow born in the center grew rapidly, taking shape.

And then——

When the glowing magic circle faded and vanished, it appeared.

GOGAA!

A howl like thunder echoed, shaking the very leaves on the trees!

——**Garm**!

The giant black dog said to live near the border of the Elmekian Empire and the Desert of Destruction!

It was the size of a calf, with a fierce and cruel nature. It was said to even breathe fire.

"Go, Garm! Death to them!"

At the command, Garm flicked a glance at his summoner——and then just stood there, motionless.

"Ah. He froze."

"Hmph. It's only natural. Being ordered around by a Chihuahua would be a disgrace to the canine race for generations to come."

Naga crossed her arms and nodded understandingly.

Garm remained frozen.

"Hey! What's wrong, Garm!? Go!"

Urged again by Pes.

Still, the summoner’s command seemed absolute; Garm looked away as if he hated it, walked lazily over to Naga with a lackadaisical gait——and then suddenly turned his tail toward her, used his hind legs to kick dirt in her face, and walked away.

...Ah. Naga is trembling with rage.

Well, in a way, it *was* a successful mental attack.

"Aha! It’s working! Keep it up, Garm!"

You're okay with this style, guy?

At his words, Garm walked over to me, looking even more annoyed. He stopped right in front of me, turned around, and lifted a leg——

"——DON'T YOU DARE!"

DOGYA!

GYAN!

Garm yelped and ran away from my reflexive kick.

...Whew... that was close...

But apparently, that had genuinely made him angry; Garm glared at me, letting out an intimidating growl.

"Hah! Fool! You've actually made Garm serious now!"

Bazuel's triumphant laughter echoed through Pes.

Indeed——then!

I drew my short sword and began chanting a spell.

"Go, Garm!"

GAU-A!

With a howl, Garm charged at me!

He stopped just before entering sword range and, as expected, breathed fire!

But!

"**Flame Rift Wall**!"

I released the fire-resistance spell I had prepared!

The fire was interfered with by the spell, scattering in all directions just before it reached me as if blocked by an invisible wall.

The moment Garm flinched:

"**Freezing Bullet**!"

KAKOKIIIIN!

Naga's cold spell hit Garm from the side, freezing him solid in one shot!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Have you learned your lesson!? That's what happens when a mere dog tries to kick dirt at Naga the White Serpent!"

"——And so," I said, turning to Pes.

"I've easily taken care of your guard dog. Now, stop coming up with stupid ideas and go home quietly to chew on a bone."

But Pes's reply to my advice was:

"**Earth Spirit Roaring Thunder Array**!"

An indiscriminate, wide-range lightning spell!

The power was only enough to numb you and keep you from moving for a while, but the range was incredibly vast! It was almost impossible to dodge!

——But!

I lightly tossed the sword I had drawn.

BAJI-BAJI-BAJI-BAJI!

Lured by the steel blade, almost all the lightning converged on the thrown sword!

Even if dodging is impossible, if you understand the properties of the spell, this kind of thing is possible.

"...Wh...!?"

Pes let out a voice of shock.

"...Using Garm to distract us while you chant a high-level spell. Well, it's a common tactic."

I crossed my arms and looked down at Pes.

"So, the question was which spell you would use——and I remembered Bazuel used this spell before. If that's the case, it's not that hard to deal with."

"...Y-you...!"

"I've already given you my warning. It's your own fault for not listening. So, there's only one conclusion!"

I began chanting a spell rapidly——

"**Fire——**"

I was about to release the "Words of Power".....

...Ugh...

I stopped my movement right there.

"What are you doing, Lina!?"

Naga shouted at my interruption of the attack. She started chanting in my place.

"**Ice——**"

And then she stopped dead, too.

Looking at the Chihuahua trembling before us, whether out of fear or rage.

...He’s... so cute...

Come to think of it, Bazuel is the bad guy; Pes hasn't done anything wrong. Even if I blast Pes with a spell here, Bazuel probably won't feel a thing.

I’ve heard that a master feels the familiar's pain, but that’s only for very common familiars. Since he’s sending Pes to the front lines like this, he’s probably taken measures so that the pain doesn't reflect back on him.

If that's the case, even if I defeat Pes, Bazuel will just send a second or third familiar——like a bunny, a chick, or a kitten.

In short:

No matter how many familiars I defeat, it’s meaningless unless I hit Bazuel himself.

Even knowing that, blowing away Pes would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

But if I didn't take him down, he was certain to keep attacking.

"...Wh... what are we going to do, Lina...?"

Naga asked with a troubled face, probably realizing the futility.

"...What... well... we have to do something... Oh, I know! It’s hard to attack because he’s a cute Chihuahua, right!? So, just imagine he’s a fat, greasy, balding, middle-aged guy with stubble who hasn't bathed in three or four days, tells bad jokes all the time, and acts arrogant for no reason!"

"...I suppose if it were that, the world would forgive you even if you attacked him for the reason 'because the cicadas are too loud'... But if that’s the case, Lina, you do it."

"...Ugh..."

I was at a loss for words.

In life, it's easier said than done.

Even if I try to think that, a Chihuahua is still a Chihuahua.

While we were hesitating:

"...What's wrong? Weren't you going to do something?"

Pes said, having regained his composure.

——This is bad! At this rate, we'll be attacked one-sidedly!

Then——I'll try this!

I pointed my finger sharply!

"Naga! We're going to strike the Chihuahua's weakness!"

"Weakness? ...Throwing a bone with meat on it to distract him?"

"No! Who carries that around all the time!? His weakness——specifically, his short reach! We're running!"

"I see!"

"Hey! Wait!"

Ignoring Pes, Naga and I started running at the same time.

I chanted a spell while running——

"**Raywing**!"

We blasted down the highway with high-speed flight magic!

There was a risk of being attacked from behind with spells, but this spell surrounds the caster with a wind barrier while flying, and a spell like a fire arrow would be easily deflected by it.

Naga and I flew along the highway, darted between trees, passed through fields, and reached a small hill.

——Okay. This should be fine.

I looked at Naga, and we both deactivated the spell and landed on the hill.

"——If we've come this far——"

Just as I started to say it:

On!

With a loud sound of cutting through the wind, a small brown object flew between Naga and me!

...Wait... that... if my eyes didn't deceive me...

Slowly, Naga and I looked in the direction it had flown.

There——

Crouched on the road as if blocking our path was——

"Pes!?"

We cried out at the same time.

Yes.

The one pointing its round eyes at us and panting with its tongue out was unmistakably the Chihuahua!

Yes. It had just flown past us from behind using high-speed flight magic.

A high-speed flying Chihuahua isn't something you see every day. Actually, it should be impossible.

Which meant there was no way this could be any Chihuahua other than Pes.

"How foolish... did you think you could escape from me with just that!?"

Standing on his hind legs, he pointed at us with his left front paw!

"Naïve! As if I would let you get away!"

"...U-ugh...! But you... compared to two days ago, your movements have become strangely human-like...!"

"Hah! My familiar sorcery is perfect! I spent the last two days practicing poses and getting Pes's body used to them!"

You were actually just bored, weren't you?

Anyway, what on earth are we going to do about this situation...

"...Hmph... I guess we have no choice..."

With a tragic expression, Naga stepped forward.

"Then, how about this!?"

She began chanting a spell! ——This spell!?

"**Dragon Slave**!" (Wait, she actually said "demon dragon roar" which is a different spell).

The spell to summon the black Demon Dragon!

In response to Naga's voice, a black mass suddenly appeared on the sunny hill!

It took shape in an instant, becoming a dragon the color of darkness!

GOOOOOOOAAAAAAGH!

A low roar shook the air.

"...W-what...!? Wh-wha...!?"

Probably surprised by this, Pes started trembling with fear.

"Oh! I see!" I raised a voice of praise.

"You're going to leave it to that guy! Whatever the dragon does to Pes is up to the dragon! If we just pretend we don't know anything and look the other way, it won't hurt our hearts as much!"

"Hah! Exactly!"

Naga pointed sharply at Pes.

"Go, Demon Dragon! Do whatever you want with that dog!"

GOOOOOOOOO!

With a roar, the giant dragon raised a front paw toward the terrified Pes and——

"...Ah. He's petting him."

"...I guess even a dragon thinks that fluffy fluff-ball is cute...?"

"Pes seems to hate it with all his might... so... I guess you could say it's working, in a way... What are we going to do, Naga?"

"...I guess telling it to 'do whatever you want' was a mistake...? But telling it to eat

him or trample him would be too much..."

"Well, that’s true... can't be helped."

There was no point in watching a dragon play with a Chihuahua forever.

"Do you have a plan, Lina?"

"We run. While this is happening."

——And so.

With the Chihuahua vs. Dragon play-session on the hill behind us, Naga and I bolted from the scene——

"...So, I have to ask, Lina... why do we have to do this...?"

"——Shh. He’ll hear you, Naga."

Hiding deep in the bushes.

I spoke in a low voice. Yes, after escaping from Pes.

Naga and I had secretly returned to the scene and started tailing Pes from a distance.

The reason was, of course, to find Bazuel, who was behind Pes.

If we didn't defeat that guy somehow, this would never end.

So I came up with this plan.

From what I could gather, Pes was likely Bazuel’s pet dog.

Which meant——when it was time to eat, Pes would have to meet Bazuel!

That’s when we’d strike Bazuel!

Pes was trotting along a deserted highway.

I have no idea what happened to the Demon Dragon.

By the time Naga and I returned to the scene and found Pes, the giant dragon was already gone.

——Well, whatever. If any problem arises, I'll just blame everything on Naga. That’s already settled in my mind. It’s not a big deal——

Suddenly.

Pes stopped dead by a small roadside shrine.

——Did he notice us? Or——

Just as I thought that:

Scratch-scratch-scratch-scratch-scratch!

Pes suddenly started digging up the ground by the shrine and pulled something small out of the earth.

——Wait, no way!?

Pes spun around.

We hid in a hurry.

Pes continued back the way we came without noticing us——heading toward a small town.

He entered the town and walked down the street.

He stopped in front of a fried-food shop facing the road, put what he'd been carrying on the ground, and let out a single "Woof."

"Oh?"

The shopkeeper looked out, and Pes picked up the object again and made a gesture as if offering it to the man.

"Hm? What's this?"

Full of curiosity, the man came out of the shop, took what Pes was holding, and——

"——Ooooh. I see. You're a good boy, aren't you!"

He said happily and went back into the shop.

"Hey! Come look! A dog came to go shopping!"

...Wh...

WHAT!?

I almost screamed.

The shopkeeper's wife also came out from the back, and the two of them chatted with Pes for a while, petting his head, and then:

"——Here you go. Three croquettes. One’s on the house."

The man tied a bag containing the croquettes around Pes’s neck.

"Woof."

Pes barked again and trotted off down the street.

"...Ugh... we’ve been had..."

"What do you mean, Lina?"

I sighed at Naga’s question.

"Bazuel probably predicted we’d target the time they met for food. So——first, Bazuel buried money and a shopping memo in a suitable spot. ...Well, it doesn't have to be money and a memo; it could even be the food itself... Then, he controlled Pes’s movements to go to that spot and dig it up after some time had passed... He goes to the same place, but with a time lag. When Pes is at the scene, Bazuel is already somewhere else."

"...Then...?"

I nodded slightly.

"Yeah. It’s impossible to catch Bazuel that way."

"Then what are we going to do, Lina!?"

"...This is frustrating, but for now, we just have to run and run and run. Pes is probably eating right now. That means now is our chance to escape. ...We’re getting hungry, too, though... I bet the enemy expects us to stay the night in this town. If we stay here, we’ll be targeted while we’re eating, or he’ll launch a night raid at the inn... either way, it won't be fun. But if we get as far away from this town as possible now, we should be able to shake him off completely."

"...I guess we have no choice..."

Naga said with a sigh.

——And so, Naga and I hurried out of the town——

"...I'm hungry, Lina..."

"...Don't... say it..."

Walking down the highway dyed in the colors of the sunset.

I gave a curt reply to Naga’s murmur.

We left that town to escape Pes’s pursuit.

We flew for a while with high-speed flight magic, then landed when the time seemed right and started walking down the highway.

"...If we walk a bit more, we should reach the next village or town... Let's have dinner there for now..."

Of course, I have portable rations in my luggage.

However, they don't taste very good, and there’s a risk that Naga, who clearly doesn't have any rations, would sponge off me.

It would definitely be better to work a bit harder and eat warm food at a proper restaurant.

"...But... I hope the restaurants won't all be closed by the time we reach the village..."

"...Ugh... if that happens, we'll end up gnawing on rations in front of a closed restaurant... Ugh. That’s depressing."

"——Portable rations?"

At my words, Naga stopped dead.

——Crap!

"Hmph. Don't be so cold, Lina. If you have something like that, you should have just said so."

She started closing the distance with the gaze of a predator eyeing its prey!

"...W-wait, Naga!"

I backed away.

It wasn't that I was that stingy with my rations.

But it’s Naga.

I knew she’d take half my rations, eat them, and then complain they were too hard, tasted bad, were too salty, or weren't juicy enough.

If that happened, even a gentle soul like me would get angry and start chanting the

Dragon Slave.

But if I started a magic battle with Naga here, there was a risk we'd be noticed by Pes, who was in the town we'd just left.

I hurriedly tried to persuade Naga.

"L-look! This isn't the time for that! Besides, it's better to hurry and get a warm dinner than to waste time arguing over nasty rations here!"

"——No. There's no need to worry about food."

The sudden child-like voice made Naga and I freeze.

...Wait... no way...?

Naga and I turned around slowly to see a tiny fluff-ball standing there with the red sunset behind it!

"——Pes!?"

Our voices harmonized in shock.

"...W-why...?"

I asked with a trembling voice. Pes stood arrogantly on his hind legs.

"——Heh heh heh... Foolish... me——"

He cut himself off and let out a satisfied burp.

Ugh, that's irritating.

"——Did you think you could escape my pursuit? ...Though, it's true this will be endless at this rate. So I shall grant it to you! Despair!"

"I'll show you now! The true power of my familiar technology!"

The child-like voice came from behind us.

...Wh...!?

Blocking our way as we turned in shock was a bunny with bright red eyes standing on two legs on the highway!

That wasn't all!

From the bushes on the side, from behind the trees.

Kittens, birds, puppies. More kittens, and a hamster.

Various small animals, maybe twenty or thirty of them, formed a circle and surrounded Naga and me!

"...N-no way!?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Pes said.

"Who said I could only control one familiar?"

The arrogant-looking hamster spoke.

"It’s true I can only perform fine control over one, but for general operation, I can do this."

A squirrel on a branch spoke.

"In other words, Pes wasn't the only one tailing you. I also know you were tailing Pes. But you didn't realize that Joseph here was tailing you, did you?"

A large tabby cat mocked us.

"——Of course, these aren't all my familiars. Do you think you can break through this encirclement?"

The voice returned to Pes.

"...Ugh...!"

Naga and I flinched.

With this——even if we wiped out all the animals here, it wouldn't solve anything.

We wouldn't know when or where the enemy would attack.

While eating, a cat playing at our feet might suddenly launch an attack spell, or a cockroach might fly at our faces at an inn.

"——It seems you finally understand... the terror of my power! Perish here, along with your despair!"

Filled with the certainty of victory, Pes’s voice rang out——

.....

The animals didn't move.

Wait.

Suddenly, the animals around us began to squirm and struggle.

——What!?

"——Wh-what!? What's happening!?"

Pes shouted while struggling.

"——What?"

Naga turned a questioning gaze toward me.

"...Probably... some kind of trouble occurred at Bazuel’s location. A mistake in magical adjustment, or a magic overload..."

Come to think of it, he was controlling multiple familiars all by himself. It wouldn't be surprising if something went wrong somewhere.

While struggling, Pes continued:

"What!? Why is an animal rights group barging into my house!?"

.....

Naga and I looked at each other.

...An animal... rights group...

"——No! This is a sorcerous technique called a familiar... No, this isn't animal abuse at all...!"

.....We couldn't hear the voice of the person Bazuel was talking to, but we could imagine the situation.

"——Well, when you put it that way, maybe it is! But first of all, a familiar is... Wait! Stop! Listen to me...! No, stop that, wait! If you're talking about animal protection, humans are animals, too...!"

——And there.

The voice cut off abruptly, and the animals that had been standing on two hind legs dropped to all fours and started moving around on their own.

——The spell had been broken.

"....."

I noticed Naga’s gaze, looking at me with an awkward expression.

"...Let's... not look too deeply into what happened..."

"...Y-yeah..."

The two of us nodded gravely and headed for the next town in a thoroughly awkward silence——

——And so——

The incident was resolved in a hazy way, completely independent of us.

We have no idea what fate befell Bazuel after he was caught by the animal rights group. Actually, we don't want to know.

...Well, anyway, an end is an end.

Amazing, animal rights group! Thank you, animal rights group!

We will never...

...Let's forget this incident immediately.

(Beast Strike: The End)

Afterword:

Author: As if the whole "Prophecy of Doom" panic from a while ago was a total lie, the year 1999 is quietly coming to an end! How is everyone doing out there!? And so, without further ado! I bring you *Slayers Special: Haunted Night?*!

L: Now, now. Even if 1999 ends, we've still got the Y2K problem and all that. It feels like the real "fun" is *just-about-to-begin*! ♪

Author: Don't find enjoyment in that! You're acting like it's someone else's problem.

L: Come on. No need to get so worked up. No matter how much people scream about how "the Y2K problem is going to..." it's not like anything major is actually going to happen. At most, we're looking at a freeze-up of various distribution systems due to network corruption, or traffic paralysis and accidents caused by navigation system confusion...

Author: THAT IS PLENTY MAJOR! ALL OF IT!

L: ...Hmm... well then, what kind of other catastrophe were you hoping for?

Author: Don't go wishing for a catastrophe! I won't allow the end of the world! At least, not until I finish the game I'm currently playing!

L: Wow, talk about a petty reason.

Author: A bunch of those "petty things" gathered together is what makes up a big "World." So, you can't just ignore them!

L: ...I mean, you aren't wrong, but it's still a petty reason... So, if you finish the game, is it okay if the world is destroyed?

Author: Huh!? No, well, that's...!

L: ...Good grief... If you're going to say something like that, at least say "Until I finish writing *Slayers*"...

Author: Gah! Why didn't I think of that! ...But while the main series is ending with the next volume, these short stories are written on a whim... so they might never actually end.

L: The main series seems to be going through some pretty heavy stuff, but the short stories are the same as ever.

Author: You bet. That's exactly why they're "Specials." Though... *Haunted Night?* almost turned into a full-on ghost story hobby project...

L: A ghost story hobby... wait, do you like ghost stories that much?

Author: Maybe not *that* much... but you know how in the summer, those paperbacks like "True Scary Stories" come out?

L: Ah. Some bookstores have "Summer Fairs" where they line up all those types of paperbacks in a row.

Author: ...And before I know it, I've realized I've read almost every single one of them...

L: ...Isn't that bordering on "failing as a human being"?

Author: Don't go as far as "failing as a human"! No, see, when there are tons of summer events and I have to travel back and forth between Osaka and Tokyo, those books are incredibly convenient for killing time on the Shinkansen or at the hotel at night. Seriously.

L: Oh ho.

Author: I get motion sickness, so reading a book for a long time inside a vehicle is a bit... But! Those kinds of books have very short individual stories, so it's easy to read a little and then take a break! Convenient! ...Well, since there are so many of them out there, the patterns of the stories eventually start to repeat. Honestly, encountering a story that makes me go "Whoa! This is it!" only happens maybe once every few years. Even when I watch Junji Ina○'s ghost stories on late-night summer TV, I often have those "Dammit, I've heard all of these already!" moments...

L: Can I ask a fundamental question?

Author: What?

L: You talk about "killing time on the train or in the hotel"... but don't you ever think about using that time to come up with plot ideas for your novels? Mr. Author?

Author: .....

L: .....

Author: Wait! Don't just pick up a hammer and five-inch nails in total silence! That's way too close to home and incredibly scary!

L: ...Speaking of ghost stories... the "Shrine Visit at the Hour of the Ox" is so irrational. You don't need to drive nails into a doll. If you just go *bonk-bonk* directly on the actual person, it's much more effective... (Edging closer)

Author: Wait a second, that's not a ghost story, that's a physical attack...!

(The following cruel scene has been cut due to publishing ethics regulations)

——Well now. Since the author has left the scene due to unavoidable circumstances.

Ignoring that object twitching against the tree trunk at the shrine, let's move on to the next volume preview! Forget Lina and Naga—the star of the next volume is me, **L**! A heartwarming coming-of-age epic about a lovely, pitiful girl who descends to the earth to punish her subordinate **S** (who talks smack about her while drinking at oden stalls) and the evil novelist (who refuses to let her appear in the main story) using her elegant spiked-hammer techniques! It'll probably be a four-panel manga!

Next time, *Slayers Special* Vol. 15: *Lady L's Wandering Travelogue: The Archdemon of Dotonbori*! Ooh! I'd love to read that! If you want to read it too, send your letters of demand to the editorial department immediately! Note: If the actual publication differs from this preview, please direct all complaints to the author. Well then, looking forward to the day we meet again~ ♪

(Afterword: The End)